

# ISAS Insights

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## New Neighbourliness in India-Sri Lanka Ties

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### Abstract

*In Sri Lanka, the latest country that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited in his frenetic foreign-policy forays, he has implicitly addressed the issue of China's influence over the island-republic, besides explicitly assuring its leaders of New Delhi's support for their efforts at national reconciliation. Tracing a trail of Indo-Lankan civilisation-ties, Modi has also invited Sri Lanka to utilise a satellite that India would be launching into Space for the benefit of South Asia.*

Neighbourhood diplomacy can be tricky even at the best of times, because any two neighbours will have common but differential expectations of a good bilateral relationship. Viewed in this light, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest visit to Sri Lanka has gone off well, without setting the Palk Strait on fire. This sums up the outcome, in a positive turn of the Thames-metaphor for the narrow waterway that bridges (or segregates) the two countries. To be sure, no diplomatic breakthroughs were announced during the two-day visit

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that concluded on 14 March 2015. By all accounts, however, the diplomatic mood and political atmospherics toned up the quotient of Indo-Sri Lankan neighbourliness.

Apart from holding talks with Sri Lanka's relatively new executive President, Maithripala Sirisena, Modi met a number of leaders, including those out of office, across the political spectrum in the island-republic. For a variety of reasons in the complex and often-chequered Indo-Lankan relations, Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to pay a purely-bilateral visit to Sri Lanka since July 1987. In that year, India's then-Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had visited Colombo for signing a bilateral accord. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement to Establish Peace and Normalcy in Sri Lanka, contrary to its positive objectives, widened the ethno-political fault-lines in the island-republic and embittered the relations between the two neighbours. Despite being designed to preserve Sri Lanka's territorial integrity through an agreed intervention by the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) to roll back a secessionist movement, the accord led to unintended consequences. The most notable of those consequences was the fierce war that ensued between the IPKF and the Sri Lankan separatist guerrilla-terrorist force, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In the mid-1980s, when that accord came into force, India was generally seen across Sri Lanka as a South Asian 'bully' bracing for regional hegemony.

## **China Factor, With a Difference**

In the mid-2010s now, it is China which is generally seen, in the wider international circles, as the ascendant power determined to stamp its will across Asia and beyond. Two of the several recent examples of this perception in South Asia about China are (1) Beijing's desire to build, albeit with the Sri Lankan Government's consent in 2014, a strategic "port city" near the island-republic's capital Colombo, and (2) the strategic access that China has gained at the Hambantota commercial port in southern Sri Lanka, more precisely at a vantage location along the vast Indian Ocean. Modi's March-2015 visit to Sri Lanka, therefore, gets assessed in the light of two inter-related aspects of the island-republic's recent foreign policy. These two aspects are Beijing's strategic calculations, as well as the multi-ethnic Sri Lankan electorate's recent choice of a new 'nationalist' President in the place of a political leader, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was perceived to have been China-friendly in his overall political calculus.

Significant in this context is that, addressing Sri Lanka's Parliament in Colombo on 13 March 2015, Modi said: "I often say that *the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would be determined by the currents of the Indian Ocean*. Shaping its direction is a responsibility for the countries in the region".<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis is added). Although Modi eschewed mentioning China by name, strategic-affairs experts need no clairvoyance to recognise where he was coming from (as in the commonplace American phrase). His focus on the Indian Ocean as a theatre for human destiny in the current Century and his call for collective multi-national responsibility in this regard should be seen against a more-recent development in China-Sri Lanka relations.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made some revealing remarks in his talks with his (visiting) Sri Lankan counterpart, Mangala Samaraweera, on 27 February 2015. Mindful of the recent exit of a perceivably pro-China president from the portals of power in Sri Lanka, Wang Yi said Beijing "holds an open attitude towards China-Sri Lanka-India trilateral cooperation and stands ready to actively discuss [this]".<sup>3</sup> In particular, Wang Yi noted that "China and India can discuss exerting their respective advantages to jointly play a positive role in Sri Lanka's economic and social development".<sup>4</sup>

China's proposal of a Sino-Indian role in promoting Colombo's development agenda is patently an answer to the growing suspicion in some quarters that Beijing has been seeking to take the Sri Lankans under its own wings, until very recently, at least. Such an extraordinary idea of Sino-Indian collaboration was floated even as Wang Yi told Samaraweera that China "expect[s] Sri Lanka to become a dazzling pearl on the 'Maritime Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'".<sup>5</sup> Cynics and sceptics may tend to dismiss such poetic pronouncements as diplomatic extravaganza of empty words with little or no practical implications. However, the memory of the Mao-era polemics in China's foreign policy cannot negate today's reality that Chinese President Xi Jinping, with visions of "Asia for Asians" and a "new model of major-power relations with the United States", has a sure strategic game-plan.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Prime Minister's address to Parliament of Sri Lanka (March 13, 2015), [www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24938/Prime\\_Ministers\\_address\\_to\\_Parliament\\_of\\_Sri\\_Lanka\\_March\\_13\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24938/Prime_Ministers_address_to_Parliament_of_Sri_Lanka_March_13_2015) (Accessed on 14 March 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Wang Yi: China Stands Ready to Actively Discuss China-Sri Lanka-India Trilateral Cooperation, 2015/02/27, [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1241671.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1241671.shtml) (Accessed on 2 March 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Wang Yi: Expect Sri Lanka to Become Pearl on "Maritime Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", 2015/02/28, [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1241672.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1241672.shtml) (Accessed on 2 March 2015)

Xi's China is keen to co-opt Sri Lanka as a key partner in his plans for a "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" and to access Hambantota for this purpose. Wu Jianmin, a top former Chinese diplomat with evident influence in Xi's Establishment, has said that the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" is a major initiative to provide "public goods", like infrastructure projects, in the global commons. The objective, according to him, is to demonstrate "facts" about China's policy of "win-win cooperation"<sup>6</sup> with the wider international community in the present era of globalisation. In other words, China is keen to erase the perception that its initiative is but a smokescreen for leadership and hegemony.

This needs to be compared and contrasted with Modi's latest pronouncements in Sri Lanka. He has spoken of the "responsibility" of "the countries of the [Indian Ocean] region" to shape its future in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This will, in effect, imply a subtle exclusion of China from the Indian Ocean Rim. Simply put, China is not a state along the Indian Ocean Rim. However, China will be central to the emerging concept of the Indo-Pacific as a vast geopolitical and geo-economic zone. For India, it might, therefore, be too early to jettison the idea of trilateral China-India-Sri Lanka cooperation. But the sparks and fumes of ideas are not the only story of high diplomacy.

### **Subtle Hint, Straight Message**

So, while Modi has not waded into Sri Lanka's China-related choices, he articulated, through subtle hints and open comments, his views regarding the island-republic's internal situation and ties with India. On the complex issue of a fair deal for Sri Lanka's minorities, especially the island's Tamil population, Modi's hint, by way of an explicit reference to India, would not have been lost on his hosts. Modi's subtle remark was as follows: "You can call this my bias. I have been a Chief Minister [of India's Gujarat state, i.e. province] for 13 years, a Prime Minister [of India] for less than a year! Today, my top priority is to make the states in India stronger. *I am a firm believer in cooperative federalism*".<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis is added). However, it is elementary knowledge that Sri Lanka fights shy of classical federalism. Aware of this, and commenting on the delicate balance between Sri Lanka's Sinhala-majority and the minorities including Muslims and others, Modi said: "*The path ahead is a choice that Sri Lanka has to make. ... But, I can assure you of this: For India, the unity and integrity of Sri*

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<sup>6</sup> S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture on 'One Belt and One Road, Asia's Stability and Prosperity' by Ambassador Wu Jianmin in Singapore on 12 March 2015

<sup>7</sup> Same source as in Note 2

*Lanka are paramount*. It is rooted in our interest. It stems from our own fundamental belief in this principle”.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis is added). In effect, this assurance overarches India’s long-standing preference for devolution of powers in Sri Lanka through the so-called process of ‘13<sup>th</sup> Amendment-Plus’. The process of devolution in Sri Lanka is a well-chronicled spin-off from the Indo-Sri Lankan diplomacy of the period when India got directly involved in the island’s affairs. What Modi has now done is to press for a fair politico-ethnic settlement by encouraging Sirisena to go the extra mile in his “inclusive” politics.

Sirisena noted that his recent visit to India and Modi’s latest reciprocal visit to Sri Lanka “have turned a new page in cooperation between [the] two countries”.<sup>9</sup> The Sri Lankan side has noted further that Modi “appreciated Sirisena’s actions towards building unity in Sri Lanka, [and Sirisena’s] achieving a high level of confidence [among the Lankan people] in a very short time”.<sup>10</sup> Of utmost importance to the Sri Lankan establishment, though, is its perception that Modi has guaranteed India’s non-interference in Colombo’s search for national unity and politico-ethnic settlement. For Colombo, this is the essence of good neighbourliness, given India’s track record of ‘softness’ towards the Sri Lankan Tamil separatists at one stage and ‘benign’ big-brotherliness towards the island-republic at a later stage.<sup>11</sup> Colombo has now quoted Modi as having told Sirisena that “India will never allow any activities against Sri Lanka to be done in our territory”.<sup>12</sup> No less important, Modi is quoted as having assured Sirisena that India would be willing to “share information” if Colombo were to inform New Delhi of anti-Lanka activities on Indian soil.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, too, Modi is said to have “readily agreed” to Sirisena’s “request” for a greater intake of Sri Lankan defence personnel at the relevant Indian institutions. As for the sharing of military intelligence and the provision of defence-related “technological services”, Modi is reported to have “agreed”,<sup>14</sup> as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> President of Sri Lanka, A New Page in Indo-Lanka Cooperation – President Sirisena, [www.president.gov.lk/news/a-new-page-in-indo-lanka-cooperation-president-sirisena/](http://www.president.gov.lk/news/a-new-page-in-indo-lanka-cooperation-president-sirisena/) (Accessed on 15 March 2015)

<sup>10</sup> President of Sri Lanka, On Arrival Visas for Sri Lankans Visiting India – Prime Minister Modi, [www.president.gov.lk/news/on-arrival-visas-for-sri-lankans-visiting-india-prime-minister-modi/](http://www.president.gov.lk/news/on-arrival-visas-for-sri-lankans-visiting-india-prime-minister-modi/) (Accessed on 15 March 2015)

<sup>11</sup> For an exploration of a critical phase in New Delhi-Colombo relations, read *The Peace Trap: An Indo-Sri Lankan Political Crisis*, by P. S. Suryanarayana, East-West Affiliated Press, Chennai, 1988

<sup>12</sup> Same source as in Note 10

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

## Economic and Cultural Links

On economic relations, Modi promised “balanced growth in [Indo-Sri Lankan] trade” by assuring Colombo that he would “address” its “concerns ... about the huge trade imbalance”.<sup>15</sup> An additional tranche of US\$ 318 million towards Sri Lanka’s railway sector has also been announced to augment the previous commitments of development assistance of the order of US\$ 1.6 billion. A swap arrangement to help stabilise Sri Lankan currency in times of crisis has now been raised to US\$ 1.5 billion from US\$ 400 million. India has evinced deep interest in scaling-up the existing free trade accord so that a pact on comprehensive economic partnership could be signed with Sri Lanka.

New Delhi’s scaled-up operational presence at the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm, highlighted during Modi’s visit to the island, opens the possibility of India gaining strategic access to this eastern port city in ways that could match China’s access to Hambantota. However, no such issues have been aired in the public domain, and India does not underestimate China’s capacity to retain considerable strategic access to Sri Lanka into the future.

Given the deep Indo-Lankan ethno-political linkages, Modi’s visit was also marked by the symbolic launching of India-aided connectivity- and rehabilitation-projects in the Jaffna region that was much ravaged during the Colombo-LTTE civil war in the recent past. India’s own concerns over the fishing “rights” of its fishermen in the general area of the Palk Strait were discussed as a “humanitarian” challenge, with an accord to continue the talks at appropriate levels.

On the overarching theme of an enduring Indo-Lankan cultural mosaic, Modi not only visited a Hindu temple in Jaffna, the cultural bastion of the Tamil-speaking Hindu-minority, but also paid homage at the holy-Buddhist ‘Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi’ in Anuradhapura. Interestingly, Anuradhapura, sacred to Sri Lanka’s Sinhala-majority Buddhists, has had links with the grand ancient Buddhist centre of Amaravati in the Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh state, as well as with several other states, in India. This and other aspects of the Indo-Lankan Buddhist connection may now be rediscovered and re-created in some ways, as Modi has promised to re-develop his birthplace of Vadnagar in Gujarat state as a Buddhist centre. During his visit to Sri Lanka now, he specifically mentioned that Vadnagar was an international centre of

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Prime Minister’s remarks to Business Community in Colombo (March 13, 2015), [www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24939/Prime\\_Ministers\\_remarks\\_to\\_Business\\_Community\\_in\\_Colombo\\_March\\_13\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24939/Prime_Ministers_remarks_to_Business_Community_in_Colombo_March_13_2015) (Accessed on 14 March 2015)

Buddhist learning in ancient times, with excavations revealing the once-upon-a-time existence of a hostel for 2,000 students.

Unsurprisingly, Modi has today given a new connectivity call by promising to develop a Buddhist Circuit in India and seeking Colombo's cooperation in developing a Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka. Ramayana is an ancient Indian epic, with the revered story spanning the two countries. However, the unfolding Indo-Lankan story in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century can have a post-modern setting, as well, if Colombo accepts Modi's invitation and utilises the satellite that India would launch into Space by the end of 2016 for the exclusive socio-economic benefit of South Asia. There is some positive sign that Colombo might do so. Sirisena publicly said, after his talks with Modi that "the Indian state and the Indian people are at a high level of knowledge, achievement and resources in modern technology". For a country like Sri Lanka, in his view, it would be "valuable" to gain "understandings" in modern technology from a country like India.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Same source as in Note 9