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INDIA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

WHY IN THE NEWS?

President of Sri Lanka, H.E. Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayaka, will embark on his first State visit to India following Sri Lanka's recent presidential and parliamentary elections. During the visit, he is set to meet with Rashtrapati Ji and hold talks with Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to discuss bilateral issues of mutual interest. President Dissanayaka will also participate in a business event in Delhi, focusing on enhancing investment opportunities and commercial linkages between India and Sri Lanka.



INDIA – SRILANKA RELATIONSHIP EVALUATION:

Area	Details
Political Engagement	Frequent high-level visits (e.g., PM Modi and Sri Lankan leaders) strengthen diplomatic ties.
Trade and Economic Cooperation	India is Sri Lanka's largest trade partner (USD 5.5 billion in 2023-24). Major investments in energy, telecommunications, and infrastructure.
Development and Humanitarian Assistance	Over USD 5 billion in aid, including major projects like the Indian Housing Project, education, healthcare, and digital identity grants.
Connectivity and Tourism	Resumed air links (Chennai-Jaffna) and ferry services (Nagapattinam-KKS). India is the largest source of tourists to Sri Lanka.
Defence and Security	Strong defence ties, joint exercises, maritime security cooperation, and regional security collaboration through the Colombo Security Conclave.
Cultural and Educational Ties	Support through cultural centres, scholarships, and academic programs to enhance people-to-people links.
Strategic Partnership	Cooperation on regional security, counter-terrorism, and disaster response.

INDIA SRILANKA BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT:

- Trade Ties:** Bilateral trade reached USD 5.5 billion in FY 2023-24, with India's exports at USD 4.1 billion. India has USD 2.2 billion in FDI, mainly in energy and infrastructure. Negotiations for the ETCA are ongoing to boost trade and services.
- Defence & Security:** India and Sri Lanka conduct annual SLINEX (naval) and MITRA SHAKTI (army) exercises, with India supporting Sri Lanka's maritime surveillance through MRCC installation. The Colombo Security Conclave strengthens regional security, focusing on counter-terrorism.
- Cultural Ties:** India supports Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage, including the Kapilavastu relics and Indian Gallery in Kandy, while promoting cultural exchange through the Indian Cultural Centre and Bharat-Kosh at the Colombo Library.
- Health Cooperation:** India provided 500,000 COVISHIELD vaccines and 100,000 RAT kits during COVID-19 and supports healthcare development, including a multi-specialty hospital in Dickoya.
- Education & Capacity Building:** India offers 710 scholarships annually to Sri Lankan students and 402 ITEC training slots alongside various professional development programs.
- People-to-People Ties:** India's 1.6 million IOTs in Sri Lanka contribute to business and agriculture with ongoing cultural and educational exchanges, including STEM training for plantation school teachers.
- Regional Relations & LTTE:** India plays a key role in SAARC for regional trade and security, supporting Sri Lanka's sovereignty and reconciliation efforts while addressing Tamil issues diplomatically.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SRILANKA FOR INDIA:

- Strategic Location:** Sri Lanka's proximity to India enhances regional security, maritime trade routes, and naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
- Cultural & Historical Ties:** Shared civilizational links, including Buddhism and long-standing cultural exchanges, deepen bilateral relations.

- 3. Economic Partnership:** Sri Lanka is a major trade partner, with India being the largest investor, focusing on energy, infrastructure, and development projects.
- 4. Regional Security Cooperation:** India and Sri Lanka collaborate on defence, including joint exercises (SLINEX, MITRA SHAKTI) and regional security frameworks like the Colombo Security Conclave.
- 5. People-to-People Relations:** A large Indian-origin Tamil community in Sri Lanka fosters deep social and economic connections, bolstered by educational and cultural exchanges.
- 6. Support during Crises:** India provided significant humanitarian aid and financial support during Sri Lanka's economic crisis, including food, fuel, and medical assistance.
- 7. Counter-Terrorism & LTTE Issues:** India supports Sri Lanka's sovereignty and peace-building efforts while addressing Tamil issues through diplomatic channels, ensuring regional stability.

AREAS OF CONCERN:

- 1. Ethnic Tensions:** The ongoing Tamil ethnic issues and reconciliation efforts remain a sensitive topic, with Sri Lanka's treatment of Tamil minorities causing occasional strains.
- 2. China's Influence:** Sri Lanka's increasing engagement with China, particularly in infrastructure projects like the Hambantota Port, is a concern for India's strategic interests in the region.
- 3. Fishing Disputes:** Frequent conflicts between Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen over maritime boundaries, particularly in the Palk Straits, create tensions.
- 4. Debt Crisis:** Sri Lanka's economic instability, exacerbated by high debt levels, places pressure on India's support, particularly in financial aid and trade.
- 5. Security Challenges:** The presence of radical elements and concerns over Sri Lanka's security policies, particularly post-Easter Sunday attacks, pose risks to regional stability.
- 6. Regional Influence:** India's competition with China for influence in Sri Lanka can impact bilateral ties and regional cooperation, requiring careful diplomatic balancing.
- 7. Environmental Concerns:** Environmental issues such as the oil spill from the MT New Diamond and the impact of industrial activities pose challenges to both nations' maritime cooperation and environmental policies.
- 8. Border Issues:** Disputes over maritime boundaries, particularly in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay, involve disagreements on fishing rights and the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

WAY FORWARD:

Area	Way Forward
Strengthening Economic Ties	Expand trade, investment, and infrastructure projects, especially in energy, ports, and renewable energy sectors. Finalize the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA).
Enhanced Maritime Cooperation	Deepen collaboration on maritime security, joint surveillance, environmental protection, and improve connectivity through ferry and air services.
Addressing Ethnic Issues	Support Sri Lanka's reconciliation process, focusing on Tamil rights, by implementing 13 constitutional amendments fostering peaceful co-existence and promoting inclusive growth in Tamil-majority areas.
Expanding People-to-People Exchanges	Increase educational, cultural, and tourism exchanges. Expand scholarships, joint research, and STEM training programs to build future cooperation.
Defence and Security	Strengthen defence collaboration through joint military exercises and regional

Area	Way Forward
Cooperation	security initiatives like the Colombo Security Conclave.
Managing External Influences	Balance Sri Lanka's relationships with China by enhancing India's strategic presence in key sectors and promoting Indian interests in infrastructure and regional connectivity.
Collaborative Regional Initiatives	Promote Sri Lanka's active role in SAARC and BIMSTEC for regional cooperation on trade, security, and disaster management.

CONCLUSION

India and Sri Lanka share a deep, multifaceted relationship that spans political, economic, cultural, and security domains. While both nations enjoy strong ties, they also face challenges such as ethnic tensions, external influence from China, and environmental concerns. Moving forward, both countries must continue to address these challenges through enhanced cooperation, mutual respect, and shared strategic interests to strengthen their partnership for regional peace, prosperity, and stability.

PRELIMS QUESTION:

Q. Consider the following statements:

1. Sri Lanka plays a significant role in ensuring regional security, particularly through cooperation on maritime security and counter-terrorism efforts.
2. Sri Lanka's cultural and historical ties with India, particularly in relation to Buddhism, enhance bilateral relations.
3. Sri Lanka is not a significant trade partner for India.

How many of the statements given above are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Answer: B

MAINS QUESTION:

Q. Evaluate the significance of Sri Lanka for India in terms of strategic, economic, and cultural relations. Discuss the key areas of concern and suggest the way forward for strengthening bilateral ties.

(250 words, 15 marks)

Ritik singh

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