

India-Sri Lanka 2.0

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India-Sri Lanka 2.0: Diplomacy, Defence, and Development

Context:

India and Sri Lanka share deep-rooted historical, cultural, and strategic ties. In recent years, the bilateral relationship has gained renewed momentum due to evolving geopolitical dynamics in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, particularly in the backdrop of **China's growing presence**.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Sri Lanka in 2025 is a landmark development, showcasing India's commitment to strengthening regional partnerships under the **Neighbourhood First** and **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** doctrines.

High-Level Engagements Between India and Sri Lanka

1. Bilateral Talks and Strategic Review

- Held **delegation-level talks** in Colombo.
- Reviewed progress under the "**Joint Vision for a Shared Future**"—an outcome of President Dissanayake's earlier visit to India.

2. Defence and Maritime Cooperation

- Signing of a **landmark Defence Pact** to enhance:
 - Strategic cooperation
 - Maritime security
 - Intelligence sharing
- Sri Lanka **assured India** that its territory will not be used against India's security interests.

- Seen as a countermeasure to **China's assertive posture** in the Indian Ocean.

3. Sectoral Cooperation

- **Energy Sector:**

- Trincomalee to be developed as a regional **energy hub**.
- **Sampur Solar Power Project** virtually inaugurated.

- **Digital and Trade:**

- Focus on digital infrastructure, healthcare, trade facilitation, and regional development.
- **₹300 crore grant** by India for Sri Lanka's **Digital Identity Project**.

- **Eastern Province Framework** signed for Indian grant assistance.

4. Economic and Financial Support

- Acknowledgement of India's **\$4.5 billion assistance** during Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis.
 - Support included **credit lines, food, and fuel aid**.
- Discussions on:
 - **Debt restructuring**
 - **Currency swap agreement** to support macroeconomic stability

Symbolism in India-Sri Lanka Engagement

1. Diplomatic Firsts

- President Dissanayake's **first foreign visit** was to India.

- PM Modi became the **first foreign guest** hosted by the new Sri Lankan President.

2. Ceremonial Recognition

- Modi received a **ceremonial welcome at Colombo's Independence Square**.
- Conferred with the **Mithra Vibhushana medal** — **Sri Lanka's highest civilian honour** for a foreign leader.
- This was the **22nd international award** received by PM Modi.

3. Cultural and Spiritual Diplomacy

- Scheduled visits to:
 - **Anuradhapura** for inaugurating India-funded development projects.
 - **IPKF Memorial**, to pay tribute to Indian peacekeepers of the 1980s.
 - Promotes **Buddhist heritage diplomacy** and cultural revival in the region.
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China's Expanding Footprint: Strategic Implications

1. Growing Investments

- Sri Lanka has received **\$3.7 billion** in Chinese infrastructure investments, including:
 - **New oil refinery** in Hambantota
 - Expansion of **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** projects

2. Hambantota Port Concerns

- Leased to China for **99 years** following debt repayment failure.
- Docking of Chinese surveillance ships like **Yuan Wang 5** has raised maritime security alarms in India.

- Sri Lanka continues to permit Chinese vessels under “replenishment” claims.

Implication for India: Increasing Chinese control in IOR undermines India’s strategic depth and influence in its own maritime neighbourhood.

Strategic Recalibration of India-Sri Lanka Ties

1. Reset in Defence Cooperation

- First-ever **umbrella Defence MoU** signed.
- Aims to consolidate:
 - Maritime security initiatives
 - Strategic intelligence exchanges
 - Joint capacity building
- Marks a **shift from cautious post-IPKF ties** of the late 1980s.

2. Support for Maritime Sovereignty

- Sri Lanka requested India’s **technical assistance** to present its claim before the **UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS)**.
- Seeks to **extend maritime boundaries** beyond its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Strategic Significance: Enhances regional cooperation on maritime law and underlines India’s role as a partner in capacity building.

Conclusion

PM Narendra Modi’s 2025 visit to Sri Lanka represents a **watershed moment** in bilateral diplomacy. It reflects:

- A deliberate **strategic recalibration** amidst China’s growing assertiveness.

- Strengthening of traditional ties through **cultural diplomacy and high-level engagement**.
- Reaffirmation of India's commitment to regional leadership under **Neighbourhood First** and **SAGAR** policies.

For UPSC relevance:

- Case study for **India's maritime strategy**.
- Example for **India's soft power** through diplomacy and cultural engagement.
- Illustration of India's **economic and strategic counter to China** in South Asia.



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