

CONTEMPORARY INDIA – SRI LANKA RELATIONS IN POST-COVID PANDEMIC PERIOD.

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Abstract

India's foreign policy under the Narendra Modi government has been focused on rebuilding cooperation in South Asia. The Indian foreign policy has been restructured as 'Neighborhood First,' which primarily plans to strengthen relations with its South Asian neighbours. In this context, India -Sri Lanka relations have been considered by scholars in South Asian politics in recent times. Relations between both countries during the immediate post-civil war period deteriorated with some better experiences. However, relations have been progressing since 2015 in the context of changing new governments in both countries. This paper examines the contemporary relations between India and Sri Lanka in the post-COVID pandemic era. The research paper is based on secondary data from books and journal articles in the relevant disciplines.

Further, recent data was collected from printed and electronic media reports. The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka faced many adversities in the country. In this context, India offered her cooperation to rebuild the collapsed economy in Sri Lanka. India extended her financial and humanitarian assistance to the government of Sri Lanka. In addition, India signed some bilateral cooperation pacts in investment projects on energy, economic, development, and cultural relations by enhancing the relations between the two countries and the people-to-people of both countries. In addition, official visits of the two premiers during times of crisis in Sri Lanka initiated mutual relations again. It was proved that India was keen to initiate her policy of 'Neighborhood First' towards her immediate maritime neighbour.

Keywords: Bilateral Relations, Contemporary, Crisis, India, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

India – Sri Lanka relations have become more important in the regional politics of South Asia. In contemporary global politics, South Asia and the Indian Ocean play a significant role in the 21st century. India's ambition to be a great power in the Asian region and at the global level has created a new approach to India's external relations. In this sense, India has given her more cooperative relations with neighbouring countries. The new developments in global trade relations, Chinese expansion of the South - Asian region, and the triggering of the economic crisis due to the COVID pandemic in certain South Asian countries have contributed to shaping contemporary Indian external affairs. India has focused on the above trends in the region and is making foreign relations called "*Neighborhood First*" with its South Asian neighbours. Therefore, India-Sri Lanka relations must be examined under the contemporary regional and global context to fulfil both countries' national interests.

Background of the study

Sri Lanka's relations with India have been reported for several centuries, and those relations have been supported to shape the Sri Lankan culture. For example, the Great Mauryan Emperor Asoka (269-232 BC) sent a Buddhist mission headed by his son Mahendra to Sri Lanka. Since then, Buddhism has dominated Sri Lankan culture among most Sinhalese. Buddhism helped to produce unity and consciousness on which subsequent political and economic foundations were established (Kedareswari, 2007). Likewise, the Sri Lankan Tamils who inhabited the Northern parts of the Island have been a part of the extended culture of the South Indian Dravidian tradition. In addition, the migration of the Indian Tamils to work in the tea plantation sector during the British colonial period also built social, cultural, and political relations in the central upcountry regions in Sri Lanka (Karunananda, 1999). Historical relations have recorded a rich history between the two countries, and studying the relations of the post-British colonial period of the 20th century is more important. Both countries gained independence from the British Empire soon after the end of World War II and became the newly independent states in the South Asian region. Since then, the India – Sri Lanka relationship has become more important in regional politics in South Asia, and those relations can be considered under five stages according to their nature.

1. Early post-independent period (1948- 1980)
2. Confrontation period (1980- 1991)
3. Neutral period (1991- 2009)
4. Sri Lanka post-civil war period (2009-2015)
5. Rebuilding relations / Post covid pandemic period (From 2015 – 2022)

Research Problem

Sri Lanka has faced several economic and political issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, further influencing the country's political and economic crisis in the post-pandemic era. In that context, how far did India maintain her foreign policy under the "Neighborhood first" theme towards Sri Lanka?

Research Objective

The main objective of this research paper is to understand the India – Sri Lanka relations from 2015 to the present. In addition, this paper examines the Indian assistants to Sri Lanka during the economic and political crisis in 2022.

Research Questions

The paper answers the following research questions.

1. What was the nature of India – Sri Lanka's bilateral relations in the post-independent period?

2. How did the relations collapse during the civil war period in Sri Lanka?
3. How did India rebuild its bilateral relations with Sri Lanka in the post-war and post-COVID pandemic?
3. How far does India maintain her foreign policy under her "Neighborhood first" theme towards Sri Lanka?

Methodology and the method of data collection.

This is a desk research conducted with the help of secondary sources. The collected data was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method. The secondary data was collected from thematic books, research articles, and contemporary printed and electronic media reports.

India – Sri Lanka Relations

Bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka in the post-independent period can be studied under the above stages. There is deep literature on bilateral relations between both countries in foreign policy. However, the following discussion tries to understand the significance of the nature of bilateral relations during the first four stages.

Early post-independent period (1948-1980)

During this period, India – Sri Lanka relations were not stable and fluctuated between trust and mistrust. The immediate post-independent government headed by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake of the United National Party (UNP) did not have a positive attitude to conduct relations with India because of their fear or apprehension of India. The UNP government has shown its unfriendly policy posture towards India several times (See Gajameragedara, 2011). For example, a representative of Sri Lanka stated at the Asian Conference of 1947,

“to fear of small countries like Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Malaya, Indonesia, etc., that they might be faced with aggression, not necessarily political but economic and demographic by their big brothers like China and India (Asian Relations Organization, 1948:74).

The fear and mistrust towards her neighbouring big brother, “India” Sri Lanka, make a sensible posture in her external relations. The policy implemented towards India (and other powerful countries) by the Sri Lankan leaders of the UNP government from 1948 -1956 concerned a friendly but distant relationship (Gajameragedara, 2011). However, the UNP government’s mistrust towards India changed in 1956 when the Bandaranaike government came to power, and the mutual friendship between Prime Minister Nehru and the Bandaranaike family supported strengthening bilateral relations (Nissanka, 2003). The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Mrs. Sirima Bandaranayake (1960-1965) and the Congress party government headed by Lal Bahadur Shastri maintained a non-aligned policy in their foreign relations with the external world. The non-aligned policy was further extended by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in India from 1970 to 1977 under her government. In this period, relations between the two countries were converted into mutual coexistence, and those relations were used to overcome bilateral issues. For example, the citizenship issue of Sri Lanka was dragged without a decision from 1948. However, after a mutual discussion between Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranayake and Prime Minister Shastri, they reached the final decision by signing the Sirima-Shastri pact in 1964. The Sirima-Shastri pact officially ended the long-term issue of the non-citizen problem of Indian-origin Tamil labourers in upcountry tea estates in Sri Lanka (Kodikara, 1965).

The Kachchativ island issue and the maritime boundary issue in the Gulf of Mannar were also solved in favour of Sri Lanka. The official discussions between the two Premiers reached a mutual pact to end the long-term issues India and Sri Lanka faced (Gajameragedara, 2011). Therefore, in the early post-independent period (1948- 1977), the foreign relations of both countries had swung from mistrust to trust.

Confrontation period (1980- 1991)

The governments of both countries were changed in 1977. In Sri Lanka, the SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranayake was defeated, and the UNP government headed by JR Jayawardena came to power again. Likewise, Indira Gandhi, too, lost her government, and the People's Party government headed by Moraji Desai came to power in India. Both governments were sound in their bilateral relations. However, the People Alliance government was not in power for an extended period, ending in 1980. The general election was conducted, and again, the Indira Congress, headed by Indira Gandhi, formed a new government. The developments of Sri Lanka's foreign policy under President Jayawardena, India's relations turned into a bad situation since the Indira Gandhi government continuously suspected the government of J.R. Jayawardane in Sri Lanka. The Indian government mostly suspected the pro-western foreign policy of Jayawardana (Gooneratne, 2000). Indian government always accused the Jayawardana government that the Sri Lankan foreign policy had focused away from the non-aligned policy, which was mainly influenced by the security of India and the entire South Asian region. In that context, the Tamil ethnic issue in Sri Lanka grew and became a protracted civil war. The Indian government had been involved in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, instigating a long-term mistrust between the two countries.

On the one hand, the Indian government continuously supported the separatist movements of Tamil rebellions in the Northern province of Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, the Indian government assisted the Sri Lankan government in seeking a political solution for the Tamil ethnic separatist issue and the country's civil war (Gooneratne, 2000). The Thimpu talks in 1985 held in Bhutan between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and Tamil separatist military groups collapsed, and the civil war in Sri Lanka continued. The GOSL highly criticized the intervention of India in the civil war and reached its peak when the Indian Air Force violated the Sri Lankan air space and dropped 25 tons of food and medicine on the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka (Gooneratne, 2000). According to Gooneratne,

“But following the airdrop of 04 June, political negotiations were suddenly jerked back into life. Moreover, after two or three weeks of hyper-active negotiating, most of it shrouded in secrecy, India and Sri Lanka, on 29 July 1987, signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement to establish peace and normalcy in Sri Lanka” (Gooneratne, 2000, p. 158).

The Indian-centric political solution for ending the civil war in Sri Lanka was followed by the Indian intervention in July 1987. India's proposal for devolution of power in Sri Lanka as a political solution for ending the country's civil war was implemented by signing the India- Sri Lanka peace accord in 1987. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka President Jayawardena signed the India – Sri Lanka peace accord to reach a permanent solution to the country's ethnic conflict (Kodikara, 1989). The India – Sri Lanka Peace Accord 1987 was highly rejected by many local political parties in Sri Lanka, and an extensive anti-Indian ideology emerged in Sri Lanka. That was further grown since the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) intervened to defeat the LTTE in the conflict-affected zones in Sri Lanka. Although GOSL decentralized the power as a political solution to the ethnic conflict, it was unsuccessful in the conflict-affected Northern and Eastern provinces. The India – Sri Lanka Peace

Accord in 1987 neither ended the civil war nor provided a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (Gooneratne,2000).

Neutral period (1991- 2009)

As mentioned above, there was a vast protest movement for the IPKF by the Sinhalese in the South and the Tamils in the country's Northern parts. The growing protest against the IPKF and the Indian government was a core issue of the election campaign in Sri Lanka in 1988. However, the Indian government later agreed to remove the IPKF from Sri Lanka within an acceptable time frame. The Indian policy of involvement in Sri Lanka's ethnic issues and the civil war was discouraged by the sudden assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE suicide bomber in Sri Perumbodur in Tamil Nādu in 1991. India was shocked by the assassination of the former Prime Minister and the leader of the Congress party, who had become the most popular leader in the election campaign. Sri Lanka's civil war was further protracted during this period, with many dynamics between war and cease-fires. Under President Chandrika Kumarathunga, the Sri Lankan government invited Norway to mediate the ethnic conflict and the civil war in 2000, and the Norway Mediator Eric Solheim headed a new peace-building project (Bullion, 2001). The role of Norway as a peace mediator in the conflict was not influential after the continuous failures of peace talks between the GOSL and the LTTE. In 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksha's government came to power and continued the war against the LTTE until it ended in 2009 by defeating the LTTE. During this period, India had little or no interest in being involved in Sri Lanka's war politics.

Sri Lanka post-civil war period (2009-2015)

India was the first country to congratulate the GOSL for the victory of three decades of civil war. The Congress government in India agreed to assist with the post-war reconstruction in the former war-affected areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. Under that cooperation, India supported many reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. For example, India initiated 50,000 housing projects in war-affected areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces and for plantation workers in Central Hill country areas. However, the situation changed when India voted against Sri Lanka in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Since the Indian government voted for the USA-backed resolution of the violation of Human Rights in 2012 and 2013, Sri Lanka and India's relations deteriorated. The dispute between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka fishermen in Palk Strait, the Kachathivu island issue, and the issue of war crimes against Sri Lanka came to the apex to deteriorate the relations with the intervention of the Tamil Nadu state government. New Delhi had no alternate solution to rebuild its relations with its immediate neighbour under the high pressure of the Tamil Nadu ruling party, which had allied with the Congress party to contest the general election in India (Thalpwila, 2014).

In addition to that, India also suspects growing bilateral relations with China. Under China- Sri Lanka relations, China had agreed to support and invest in many development projects in Sri Lanka, and some investment was in strategic locations in Sri Lanka. China's growing involvement in Sri Lanka always causes trouble for India regarding her security and stability in the South Asian region.

Rebuilding Relations and post covid pandemic period from 2015.

The main objective of this paper is to broadly examine the bilateral relations between both countries in the post-pandemic period. However, before the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka in 2015, both countries reported a political change in their general elections. In India, Narendra Modi came to power and established a BJP government. In Sri Lanka, the United Nations Front defeated Mahinda

Rajapaksha's government, and Maithreepala Sirisena was sworn in as the President of Sri Lanka. This political power change significantly transformed bilateral relations in both countries. Growing relations between the two countries have been marked by high-level exchanges of visits at regular intervals. Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka in March 2015, and again, the Indian Prime Minister visited Sri Lanka in May 2017 to attend the International Day of Vesak celebration (Times of India). Again, in 2019, Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi arrived in Sri Lanka for a short visit to express solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka after the Easter Sunday attack (Attanayake, 2019). In addition to that, former Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena visited India five times. In 2019, President Gotabaya Rajapaksha came to power, and the Indian government further enhanced bilateral relations with her immediate neighbour. Former Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksha visited India in November 2019 on his first overseas trip as the President of Sri Lanka to enhance relations. Traditionally, Sri Lankan Premiers visit New Delhi as their first official overseas destination, continuing in the rebuilding era. Sri Narendra Modi stated that the election victory of both governments should strengthen their new relations (Panda, 2015).

Likewise, High-rank Indian government officers appreciated the Indian attitude to rebuilding relations between both countries; for example, the Indian Foreign Secretary officially announced in October 2021 that the relationship between both countries should be reached, like in the 1970s /1980s.

The rebuilding of relations mainly was proved by the period of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka triggered in 2020 in the post-COVID pandemic period and the political crisis where President Gotabaya Rajapaksha had to resign from his post in July 2022. The economic crisis 2022 badly influenced the Sri Lankan economy and was the most significant economic crisis ever in the post-independent period (Khandre, 2022). Sri Lanka experienced a shortage of foreign reserves in the last couple of years. This is reflected in the steady decline in official foreign reserves held by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, falling from about 8 billion less to 2 billion US \$. In two years, Sri Lanka's annual trade deficit has climbed from about US\$ 6 billion to US\$ 8 billion. The GOSL announced that they restrict the country's imports, so there was a massive shortage of essential goods such as fuel, gas, medicine, and some food items. Sri Lanka asked many countries for economic assistance, and many did not favour helping a declining economy. In that context, India positively regards Sri Lanka as her traditional friend.

India's involvement in the economic crisis in Sri Lanka

When the Sri Lankan economy reached its worst situation, GOSL requested the Indian government's assistance with the economic crisis. In December 2021, bilateral talks started, and two finance ministers in both countries met in New Delhi. As a result of those bilateral talks, India agreed to provide humanitarian and financial assistance to Sri Lanka. The monetary assistance was designed under the credit line facility, which could be used to import essential items and fuel. India provided US\$ 3.5 billion under this credit line facility, and GOSL could import Petrol, Diesel, Kerosine oil, and medicine using that. For instance, Sri Lanka has imported 40,000 metric tons of diesel, 40,000 metric tons of petrol, and 400,000 tons of cooking gas using Indian credit line assistance.

Further, India provided Shipment of rice, milk powder, medical drugs, and fertilizer under the Indian credit line assistance as humanitarian assistance. Minister of External Affairs in India, Dr Jaishankar, stated at Thiruvananthapuram International Airport that the government of India has always assisted Sri Lanka with its needs (Derana). This was further confirmed by the Minister of External Affairs in India, stating again that India had done the best of its abilities to assist Sri Lanka (News First). When Ranil Wickramasinghe assumed duties as the new President of Sri Lanka, the Indian Prime Minister congratulated him and said India would continuously support Sri Lanka (The Hindu)(Siriwasan, 2022).

In July 2023, President Wickramasinghe, on his two-day official tour to New Delhi, expressed profound appreciation for the solidarity and support extended by India during Sri Lanka's trying time (Daily News, 2023). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed that India is always with Sri Lanka in her time of need (Daily News, 2023).

Not only did India provide financial and humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka, but it also supported enhancing the field of economic, technological, and cultural cooperation during the post-pandemic period to rebuild bilateral relations since 2015. For example, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka twice in January 2023; it was agreed upon to implement a joint program focusing on socio-economic development infrastructure in education, health, and community development sectors. The Sri Lankan government granted permission to the Adani group to build two wind power plant projects in Poonarini and Mannar, an investment of over US\$ 500 million. Ceylon Electricity Board and National Thermal Power cooperation in India signed a joint venture agreement to build a solar electricity generating plant at Sampur to enhance energy power. Besides those agreements, India had agreed to implement a model housing project in Kandy, Nuwara-Eliya, and Galle and to promote the tourist industry in Sri Lanka. To promote the tourist industry in both countries, the recent recommencement of the Chennai – Jaffna air service would be essential to accelerate the people-to-people connection. The Indian government invited Sri Lanka to make the inaugural flight to Kushinara International Airport, which was declared open as an international airport (High Commission of India, 2023). As a symbol of friendship, the Indian government provided 500 passenger buses to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence. In his official visit to Colombo, Dr Jaishankar assured that India would extend financing assurances to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for Sri Lanka's debt restructuring program to recover from the economic crisis. Further, he said that the primary purpose of his visit to Colombo was to express India's solidarity with Sri Lanka during its difficult moments (Daily News, 2023). It is noteworthy to mention that India expressed her posture soon on IMF- the led debt restructuring program- by conveying financing assurances to the IMF on Sri Lanka while China was postponing her decision.

During his visit to Sri Lanka, Dr Jaishankar officially handed over the Indian Prime minister's invitation to President Wickramasinghe to visit India. According to that, during the maiden official visit of President Ranil Wickramasinghe to New Delhi in July 2023, many media reported it as a historic visit to rebuild relations between the two countries. During his visit, President Wickramasinghe said,

"I believe that my visit to India has provided an opportunity to review our bilateral relationship, leverage the strength of geographical and civilizational links, and reinforce trust and confidence for our future prosperity in the modern world. I am confident that our discussions will lay the foundation for the next 25 years of India- Lanka relations..." (Daily News, 2023).

During his visit to New Delhi, President Wickramasinghe conducted mutual discussions on several bilateral relations focusing on strengthening air, maritime, energy, power, trade, economic, financial, and people-to-people connectivity. India's first international cruise from Chennai to Sri Lanka flagged off in June 2023, and Chennai – Jaffna international flight resumed daily from July 2023. India was further looking to enhance its air services to other important cities in Sri Lanka. Growing bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka marked their peak in the post-COVID pandemic era by implementing several projects, programs, and agreements.

Conclusion

India- Sri Lanka relations have a long history of trust and mistrust since the post-independent period. During the civil war in Sri Lanka, bilateral relations deteriorated, and steps were taken to enhance the relations between both countries. Geo-political factors have mainly influenced either the development of cooperation or confrontation. For example, Tamil Nadu has become a critical factor in the deterioration of relations since the 1980s. However, occasionally, there are many examples of both countries working with each other to build their cooperation. The post-COVID pandemic period can be identified as such an era because the Indian government extended its support to recover the collapsed economy of Sri Lanka. The policy of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "Neighborhood First," became a reality when Sri Lanka was going through its most severe economic crisis in the history of the post-independent period. In other words, India's extended support to Sri Lanka proved India's solidarity with Sri Lanka during difficulties aligned with the Neighborhood First policy. Both countries built an amicable relationship during the post-pandemic period, and it was a pivotal period in India- Sri Lanka relations in the 21st century.

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