

**DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN INDIA AND SRI LANKA UNDER THE
NARENDRA MODI GOVERNMENT**

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Abstract

This research paper examines the trajectory of diplomatic engagement between India and Sri Lanka under the Narendra Modi government (2014–present). Situated within the broader framework of India's Neighbourhood First Policy and the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, the paper analyses key dimensions of bilateral relations including political diplomacy, economic cooperation, maritime security, developmental assistance, and the enduring Tamil ethnic question. Drawing on primary statements, policy documents, and secondary scholarly sources, the paper argues that while the Modi era has witnessed a significant deepening of bilateral ties marked by high-level visits, infrastructure investments, and connectivity initiatives, structural challenges — particularly the unresolved Tamil issue, Chinese influence in Colombo, and Sri Lanka's post-2022 economic crisis — continue to complicate the relationship. The study concludes that sustained and nuanced engagement, sensitive to Sri Lanka's domestic political compulsions, is essential for India to maintain its strategic primacy in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood.

Keywords: Bilateral diplomacy, China factor, Indian Ocean, Neighbourhood First Policy, SAGAR

1. Introduction

India and Sri Lanka have one of South Asia's most layered bilateral relationships, moulded by geographic proximity, civilisational links, a common Buddhist inheritance, demographic ties and tangled postcolonial politics. The two nations are separated by the 31-kilometre Palk Strait but their closeness has just as frequently led to tension as cooperation. From the controversial Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1964 on Indian Tamil repatriation to a controversial military intervention by India through the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987–1990, and from the spectre of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to current worries about Chinese strategic encroachment, bilateral relations have never been straightforward (de Silva, 2005; Dixit, 1998).

Narendra Modi's rise to the office of the Prime Minister of India in May 2014 marked a renewed focus on re-envisioning India's foreign policy, with a new zest for its immediate neighbours. The Neighbourhood First Policy, which was symbolically announced by inviting leaders from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to Modi's swearing-in ceremony, indicated that South Asia would be prioritised in India's strategic calculus (Hall, 2019). Sri Lanka, a key Indian Ocean neighbour, quickly became a target for the new bursts of diplomacy.

The paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the dynamics within India–Sri Lanka diplomatic engagement under the Modi government. It is structured thematically, touching on the political and diplomatic aspect of things, economic and trade relations, development cooperation, maritime and security relationships, the Tamil ethnic question as well as the China factor. It ends with a review of what is possible and not possible in bilateral relations against the backdrop of the current geopolitical context.

2. Review of Literature

The academia on India–Sri Lanka relations make for a fascinating and layered reading, combining historical, strategic, economic and socio-political scholarly work. Knowing the contours of this relationship requires more than reading foundational historical texts; contemporary foreign policy analyses, economic assessments, maritime security studies and ethnic conflict literature must also be consulted. Together, these works shed light on the complexities and contradictions that have shaped bilateral relations over time — especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014.

The foundational historical narratives — especially de Silva (2005) and Dixit (1998) — assert the significant civilisational, demographic, and political continuities that have influenced India–Sri Lanka relations from independence. De Silva (2005) understands the bilateral relationship in terms of its *longue durée*, situating Sri Lanka within the civilisational region of South Asia and tracing continuities between cultural, religious and ethnic linkages that bind the two nations. Dixit's (1998) insider account of India's diplomatic engagement, particularly through the episode of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF), offers a granular view of the tangled strategic missteps that have conditioned Indian decision-making toward Colombo ever since.

Since 2014, literature on India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has proliferated considerably. Hall (2019) convincingly argues that the Modi government reflected a genuine ideological and stylistic departure from previous governments. Pant (2017) frames Modi's diplomacy through the lens of India's strategic culture, arguing that his neighbourhood policy marked a shift towards more transactional, results-oriented policies. Mohan (2015), approaching from a realist geopolitical perspective, draws out the ambitious order-building objectives which underpin both the Neighbourhood First Policy and the SAGAR doctrine.

Kelegama (2014) and Wignaraja (2015) provide empirical examinations of the India–Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA), describing structural asymmetries in bilateral trade and political economy constraints that have prevented deeper economic integration. Brewster (2014) offers the gold standard analysis of India's Indian Ocean strategy and New Delhi's concerns about Chinese encirclement and Sri Lanka's geostrategic location. Rajagopalan (2019) provides a policy-focused overview highlighting the fisheries dispute and developmental cooperation as key friction points. Together, these analyses illustrate the enduring complexities shaping bilateral ties under the Modi dispensation.

3. Methodology

This paper utilises a qualitative, interpretive methodology within the framework of foreign policy analysis (FPA). The FPA framework as crafted by Hudson (2007) and employed in South Asian contexts by Pant (2017) privileges how decision-makers, institutional structures, domestic political imperatives and strategic perceptions shape state behaviour in the international arena.

The study relies on two source categories. The first includes official primary sources: joint statements, press releases and policy documents issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; speeches and statements by the Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister; United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions; and bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) between India and Sri Lanka. The second category includes peer-reviewed secondary literature, academic monographs and policy research from recognised think tanks such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Pathfinder Foundation (Colombo) and the Lowy Institute.

The paper is thematically structured, exploring the features of the bilateral relationship through six core substantive spheres: political diplomacy; economic relations; development cooperation; maritime security; the Tamil question; and the China factor. One should note the analytic limitations: as a desk-based research activity based on published sources, the paper benefits from no original fieldwork, elite interviews or classified diplomatic communications.

4. Theoretical and Policy Framework

Modi's Neighbourhood First Policy is a conceptual evolution from the strategic restraint-led bilateralism that shaped most of post-Cold War Indian foreign policy. Delhi now offers connectivity, economic integration, people-to-people contacts and public goods to immediate neighbours as instruments of soft power and strategic consolidation (Pant, 2017). Scholars like C. Raja Mohan (2015) have contextualised this within a grander idea of an Indian Monroe Doctrine — a new doctrine by New Delhi to settle on and define a zone of primacy for India in South Asia and the adjacent Indian Ocean region.

Modi's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, announced during his 2015 visit to Mauritius, complements the Neighbourhood First Policy. India's SAGAR vision establishes the

country as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Mohan, 2015), with an emphasis on maritime cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) features, focusing on combating non-traditional security threats. Sri Lanka, located at the maritime crossroads of the Indian Ocean, occupies a central place in this strategic framework and its alignment with Indian security interests has been an enduring priority of the Modi government.

5. Political and Diplomatic Engagement

The Modi era has been marked by an unprecedented number and depth of high-level diplomatic exchanges between India and Sri Lanka. Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in March 2015 — the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister in 28 years — underlined the importance that New Delhi attached to the relationship following the election of President Maithripala Sirisena (Bajpai et al., 2014). During this visit, Modi addressed the Sri Lankan Parliament, paid homage at the Mahabodhi Temple in Anuradhapura as an act of civilisational solidarity, and announced bilateral measures including USD 318 million in lines of credit (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Subsequent summits by Sri Lankan Presidents Sirisena, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Ranil Wickremesinghe continued this trend. Modi's visit to Colombo in 2019 demonstrated India's solidarity with Sri Lanka in the wake of the Easter Sunday bombings, setting counter-terrorism cooperation as a significant measurement in security ties (Mohan, 2019). The visit of President Wickremesinghe to New Delhi in 2023, following Sri Lanka's severe economic crisis, further cemented India's position as the creditor of first resort and strategic partner of choice for Colombo (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

6. Economic and Trade Relations

India is Sri Lanka's biggest trading partner and one of its largest sources of foreign direct investment. Two-way trade, estimated at USD 5.45 billion in 2022, encompasses a range of goods from petroleum products, textiles and machinery to agricultural commodities (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). The India–Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA), operational since 2000, has provided the basis for trade liberalisation, but non-tariff barriers on both sides have limited its full potential utilisation (Kelegama, 2014).

Negotiations for a more comprehensive Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) have progressed fitfully, owing in particular to opposition from Sri Lankan trade unions and industry associations who fear Indian domination in the services sector (Wignaraja, 2015). Yet, the Modi government has continued to favour ETCA as a means of deepening economic integration and tying Sri Lanka more firmly into India's economic orbit.

India's most far-reaching test of diplomatic commitment was Sri Lanka's acute economic crisis in 2022. Over USD 4 billion in emergency financial assistance, currency swaps, credit lines for fuel and essential commodities, and humanitarian assistance were extended from India (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). This intervention not only stabilised the immediate crisis but drastically enhanced India's strategic position in Colombo, stamping the asymmetric interdependence that characterises the bilateral relationship.

7. Maritime and Security Cooperation

Given Sri Lanka's strategic location on major Indian Ocean sea lanes of communication, maritime security cooperation has been a core pillar of the bilateral relationship. India has institutionalised naval cooperation with Sri Lanka through combined maritime patrols — SLINEX — and coast guard coordination to tackle piracy, drug trafficking, illegal fishing activities and other forms of maritime smuggling (Brewster, 2014). A Memorandum of Understanding on White Shipping Information Sharing in 2021 strengthened maritime domain awareness capabilities for both navies (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

The entry of Indian fishermen into Sri Lankan territorial waters in the Palk Bay has been a recurring bilateral friction point. The Modi government has taken up the issue of Indian fishermen detained in Sri Lanka with Colombo at the highest level and has suggested a shift towards deep-sea fishing as a

permanent solution, though implementation has been slow (Rajagopalan, 2019). Post-Easter Sunday bombings, improved intelligence sharing, joint anti-terrorism training exercises and renewed bilateral extradition treaty discussions have all been pursued.

8. The Tamil Ethnic Question

The unresolved political status of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority — around 11 per cent of the population, mostly in the North and East — remains the most durable and politically sensitive aspect of India–Sri Lanka relations. The Modi government has repeatedly pressed Sri Lanka to honour its responsibilities under the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which makes provisions for autonomy to Provincial Councils including the Tamil-majority Northern Province. Indian diplomatic pronouncements have consistently emphasised the need for a political settlement guaranteeing equality, dignity and meaningful devolution for the Tamil community, along with the release of political prisoners and accountability for alleged war crimes during the closing phase of the civil war (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Sinhalese nationalist political pressures and deep institutional reluctance within the military and security establishment to accept accountability have seen successive Sri Lankan governments move with deliberate caution on the Tamil question. India has abstained from co-sponsoring punitive international mechanisms, sticking to bilateral-level mechanisms to keep pressure on Colombo to implement its constitutional and human rights commitments (Rajagopalan, 2019).

9. The China Factor

The increasing intensity of Chinese strategic involvement in Sri Lanka — most vividly represented by the 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017 — has been a significant driver of Indian strategic unease (Brewster, 2014; Pant, 2017). China's Belt and Road Initiative investments in Sri Lanka, including the Colombo Port City, construction of motorways and energy infrastructure, have totalled more than USD 12 billion, making Beijing one of the largest bilateral financiers for Sri Lanka (Mohan, 2015).

Indian strategic analysts have portrayed Chinese actions in Sri Lanka as part of a broader "String of Pearls" strategy — a series of Chinese maritime strategic capabilities enclosing India along the Indian Ocean littoral (Brewster, 2014). The Modi government has responded by accelerating Indian economic engagement and development assistance, aiming to demonstrate that India is a more dependable partner without conditions. Initiatives such as the revival of the Pamban Bridge rail link, ferry services between Trincomalee and Chennai, and discussions on energy grid interconnection all aim to deepen economic integration on a competitive basis vis-à-vis China (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

10. Assessment and Prospects

There has undoubtedly been a qualitative deepening of India–Sri Lanka diplomatic engagement during the Modi era, with higher levels of diplomatic traffic, larger financial commitments, expanded sectoral cooperation and a more active Indian posture on the Tamil political question. India's economic lifeline during the 2022 crisis showcased both strategic commitment and financial wherewithal consistent with the Neighbourhood First Policy.

Nevertheless, significant structural challenges persist. The political will to implement meaningful devolution under the 13th Amendment is wanting from Colombo. China's commercial and strategic footprint in Sri Lanka continues expanding, while Colombo's foreign policy elite has demonstrated a deliberate preference for balancing between New Delhi and Beijing rather than outright alignment with either (Alagappa, 2008; Brewster, 2014). If the strategic goals of India's Neighbourhood First Policy in Sri Lanka are to be achieved, they must balance economic and security engagements with a long-term diplomatic investment into the reconciliation process in post-war Sri Lanka.

11. Conclusion

This paper has tracked the multidimensional contours of bilateral diplomatic engagement under the Narendra Modi dispensation, indicating an escalation of engagement across the political, economic,

security and developmental domains between India and Sri Lanka. The Neighbourhood First Policy and the SAGAR doctrine have formed the broader strategic rationale for India's calibrated engagement with Colombo, while the China factor and Tamil ethnic question have constituted principal structural constraints to realising the full potential of this relationship.

Under Modi, India has cast itself as Sri Lanka's irreplaceable first-resort partner — foreshadowed most dramatically by its crisis-time funding support in 2022 — even as it pushes Colombo on political accountability and Tamil rights. Keeping these two imperatives in balance without compromising one for the other will determine the quality and durability of India–Sri Lanka relations over the next decade. With the Indian Ocean becoming an increasingly contested geopolitical space, the strategic stakes of this bilateral relationship have never been higher, and the case for sustained, sensitive and strategically-grounded Indian diplomacy toward Sri Lanka has never been stronger.

Declaration: The article/research paper has not been published and has not been submitted or accepted for publication by any other journal, magazine or book publishing house.

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