

Diplomatic Push To Revitalize Indo-Lanka Relations



Milinda Moragoda with Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India in January 2009.

India and Sri Lanka have been the embodiment of friendly relations for centuries. Political family dynasties have navigated bilateral relations through post-

independence through mutual love. Today it’s a modified microcosm of testing ties amid power struggles redefining bilateral cooperation and future prosperity. The Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Sri Lanka Diplomatic Missions in India – 2021/2023 attempts to restore and reset the lost world of win-win diplomacy between India and Sri Lanka.

By Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane

With its strategic importance, Sri Lanka is the ‘poster child’ in the universe of geopolitical power dynamics. In the profoundly fraught and touchy state of interstate ‘love-hate’ relations, reconciling the nature of the relationship between India and Sri Lanka will indeed prove to be an exhaustive exercise in searching through the theories of international relations and diplomacy. But there’s no denying that ties between the mighty neighbor and the tear-drop island have been typically accommodating and arcane going back to many millennia.

There’s never a meeting between the leaders and representatives of the two countries that doesn’t go without waxing eloquent on the shared histories and shared values. For the layperson detached from the storms of geopolitical challenges and national interests, would seem that there could not be a better friend for each other. But in the reality of the intense power competition in the region and the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is thrust between several superpowers and emerging power and their ambitions. Sri Lanka is walking a tight rope to manage external relations to secure national interests while evaluating its role in an unfolding global drama of power politics. In trying to strike a balance and often confronting issues of shared loyalty, Sri Lanka has run into many a diplomatic storm with its neighbor – India.

Beyond the conundrums of the regional geopolitical context, the emblematic evidence for cooperation between India and Sri Lanka is immense. However, the reality of the changes in the geopolitical equilibrium has altered this relationship into one of ‘transactionalism’. As a result, country ties have been drifting from celebrating the cherished commonalities to disruptions to renewal. In a bid to change course and achieve Sri Lanka’s foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis India, Milinda Moragoda, Sri Lanka’s high commissioner for India, has developed a road map for the next two years. The Integrated Country Strategy for Sri Lanka Diplomatic Missions in India – 2021/2023 is intended for the ‘Country Team’

consisting of the three missions in New Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai. They will coordinate to achieve the seven goals and objectives therein, which would provide an evolving framework or blueprint to gain maximum leverage and breakout of any diplomatic gridlocks between India and Sri Lanka.

Moragoda's comprehensive proposal, to the international relations specialist or even to the rationalist, may come out as being ambitious and something of a repeat attempt that hardly translates into action as envoys and governments change. But, Moragoda is a 'friend' of India, a special one who is 'handpicked' to serve Sri Lanka in India because the latter believes there could be a greater impetus to inject new life into bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Moragoda's report delves directly into that 'hope' of renewing many strategic partnerships that had been left unfinished.

The high commissioner-designate begins his monologue addressed to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa with an accompanying letter. It underscores the importance of India-Sri Lanka ties, reminding of the civilizational bond between the two countries when Sri Lanka was also 'handpicked' by Emperor Ashoka for the propagation of Buddhism. In addition, Moragoda points to seminal factors such as geography, economics, culture, history, and, just as importantly, democratic values that connect the two countries. While acknowledging the dicey nature of Indo-Lanka ties that have gotten tossed in the storms of national interests and geopolitical calculations, he nonetheless deems the friendship's vicissitudes temporary and mendable. So, one can only deduce that Moragoda's intentions are undoubtedly genuine, that he considers his appointment as an opportunity to get back on the track of congenial relations governed by mutual respect and acceptance of each's interests and ambitions.

The ICS has seven key mission goals, with objectives under each goal, justification, and critical tasks for implementation. The overarching implication seen from perusing the document is that Moragoda has shed light on the immense potential for Sri Lanka in many areas of engagement with India. At the same time, he sensibly ties his key mission goals with the macroeconomic targets outlined in the government's policy framework document – Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour. The seven key mission goals are:

Mission Goal 1: Elevate the existing close bilateral relationship to a strategic level through increased interactions at the political level

Sri Lanka has felt the consequences of the fallout from failed partnerships and economic development projects with India. And the top priority of the ICS is to infuse heightened interaction between the two countries at the highest level of head of state to parliamentary and state/local government level to press the reset button for renewed ties. Moragoda doesn't miss the strategic nature of this relationship. However, foreign relations observers may lament that a knowledge of the nuances of diplomacy is absent in shortsighted lawmakers that celebrate shortterm victories over long-term gains for the country.

At the highest level, India and Sri Lanka have managed to iron out differences with a patch-up visit or two when relations hit a nadir. However, it is vital to revive the once-vibrant Indo-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Friendship Group in India's Parliament to increase connectivity between people's representatives in the two countries. It is a timely proposal to gather the support of a vital constituency in power that can navigate and influence the local narrative in opposition to Indo-Lanka bilateral relations. Bilateral relations, in effect, have to permeate all levels of government so that it does not hit a snag at a certain level, thereby preventing enhanced cooperation for mutual gains.

The issue of externally displaced persons living in India having fled Sri Lanka at various times, some nearly three decades ago, while others during the height of the war in the 2000s, has been a thorn in the relations between the two countries. Although the UNHCR has been facilitating voluntary repatriation, various factors have been impeding the process. It's a timely consideration that will require a great deal of diplomacy and dexterousness in mediation that the high commissioner-designate has added to his repertoire of duties. He proposes through a multipronged approach of preparing a comprehensive resettlement plan by the Government of Sri Lanka and formally conveyed to the Ministry of External Affairs of India to engage with the UNHCR and other stakeholders after positive feedback from the Ministry of External Affairs of India. In this exercise, positive engagement with the political leadership of Tamil Nadu to encourage and facilitate a smooth return of the EDPs is of paramount importance.



Milinda Moragoda addressing the gathering at the 'Vibrant Gujarat' Investors Forum, 2009.



Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India and Milinda Moragoda at the 'Vibrant Gujarat' Investors Forum, 2009.

Focusing further on his strong thrust to take bilateral relations to a new level under his diplomatic stewardship, Moragoda proposes to regularly convene the Indo-Sri Lanka Joint Commission and other bilateral joint committees to streamline their work. In addition, the document offers to look at new areas of cooperation, including through the India-Sri Lanka Foundation and the Kalinga Lanka Foundation, and other bilateral joint committees on various sectors. The timely convening of the Indo-Sri Lanka Joint Commission and other bilateral joint committees is critical for implementation since they make the leading policy platforms through which the countries execute bilateral cooperation.

Mission Goal 2: Bolster foreign investments as well as earnings from exports

Moragoda proposes forming an Inter-Agency Committee on Trade, Investment, and Tourism under the Country Team. It would have representatives of the SLEDB, BOI, Sri Lanka Tourism, Sri Lanka Tea Board, and Sri Lankan Airlines handling the Indian market, convened by the officer handling trade and economic matters in the High Commission in New Delhi.

Increasing Indian investments in Sri Lanka and facilitating ongoing large-scale economic development and investment-driven projects is also a priority, with the Sri Lankan missions in India envisaging a US$ 256.1 million (Avg. Investment figure 2016-2020 X 50%) FDI target from India for 2022. The sectors identified are auto components, electrical and electronics, food processing, hospitality, Information Technologyenabled services, infrastructure, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy, and textiles. It urges the government to follow-up on the existing proposed investments by India in Sri Lanka, namely, the West Container Terminal of

Colombo Port, the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm, projects of cooperation in the power sector, Indian projects under development cooperation,and lines of credit as well as financial cooperation. Critical tasks to attract FDI from India include creating a focused investment promotion strategy, augmented by documenting high-net-worth investors and corporates in India while roping Indian trade chambers and industry associations into the equation to meet through business meetings and networking. Suppose Moragoda's strategies to attract Indian FDI are successful. In that case, it will be an opportunity for the Sri Lankan economy to create jobs and enhance skills by transferring technology and knowledge and heightened competitiveness.

Conversely, Sri Lanka's basket of exports such as spices and concentrates, processed food, tea, apparel, ceramic and porcelain items, printing and packaging, coconut-related products, and electrical machinery, components, and parts are targeted for an increase in 2022, with target earnings of US$ 674.15 million (Based on 2016-2020 Avg export value from SL to India). However, the ICS identifies several vital tasks that requires implementation to boost exports between the two countries, such as revisiting the allocation of quantity quotas under the FTA. At the same time, there has to be an aggressive thrust towards participation in trade fairs, B2B meetings with potential exporters, business networking, and setting up business councils in Mumbai and Chennai. Reviving the Indo-Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce and Industry operations in New Delhi is a stimulus to this process.

Further, the imperative feature of value addition supported by new technology will be a giant leap forward. For this, Sri Lanka requires technology innovation, capacity-building, product development, an initiative that India can be of immense value for inclusive economic growth and development in Sri Lanka.

For a long time, India has provided a thriving market for Sri Lanka tourism. Despite the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, the three missions in India have set an ambitious target of 169,955 forecasted arrivals from India in 2022. Promoting sectors such as MICE, weddings, films, the Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka is considered as possessing much potential in India.

Mission Goal 3: Expand collaboration in the fields of strategic cooperation, defense, and Indian Ocean security between Sri Lanka and India

The third mission goal draws attention to the role of military diplomacy as highly vital to achieve a climate of confidence. Over and above, it opens the door to prevent a confrontation between two countries by helping to improve relations.

Strategic cooperation in defense and security between India and Sri Lanka has been crucial in war and peace. The objective is to develop mechanisms that enhance political-level strategic collaboration. According to the document, the Indian government offers Sri Lankan defense personnel the largest share of training berths in the military segment.

Further, as a demonstration of India's commitment to widening military cooperation, in 2019, India had announced a US$ 50 million special Line of Credit for counter-terrorism activities, which Sri Lanka is yet to utilize. Defense cooperation is imperative, as acknowledged by Moragoda, for Sri Lanka to increase its capabilities. It will be a force to boost commitment to regional security exigencies. However, efforts need to be continuous and sustained at many levels – policy, political, and executive level-to succeed. Some of the actionable proposals include conducting joint training and education, defense cooperation and maritime cooperation, and logistical support and strengthening the Office of the Defense Advisor in the High Commission of Sri Lanka in New Delhi by increasing its staff strength and appointing an Assistant to the Defense Advisor.

Mission Goal 4: Further enhance cooperation between Sri Lanka and India, particularly in the fields of culture, education and science, and technology, to promote Sri Lanka's interests

Beyond military might, Moragoda seeks to exploit the potential in the tools of soft power to make friends and influence people, a more graceful strategy in the universe of self-centered tools of hard power. It's receiving promotion by even the most ambitious nations as a scheme to further national interests delicately. It's hardly deniable that things like culture, education, language and religion, even sports and cuisine, are sometimes the most relatable products between countries. For India and Sri Lanka, it's a binding of histories because the commonalities are obvious and transcend the conflictual.

In conducting sounder international relations, it becomes a strategic tool. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India is still important to Sri Lanka, which is evident in the close ties between the missions and the many Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in India. There are many proposals for religious and scholarly exchanges between the two countries. The document proposes that scholars and students from India study Buddhist philosophy in Sri Lanka, while the Sri Lankan counterparts could engage in Buddhist and Pali language studies in India. Hinduism is homegrown in India and has made great strides into Sri Lanka, cementing further ties between the two

countries. Hence, the document makes a strong thrust for interaction between Sri Lankan Hindu religious leaders and scholars and their Indian counterparts. If it does happen, the ceremonial handing over of the sacred stone from the Sita Amman temple in Sri Lanka to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya will become an overt act of faith-based diplomacy.

There is also a provision to promote India's and Sri Lanka's national and religious festivals and art forms through exchanges and training initiatives. Religion seems to be of great significance, not surprising when both regional allies harbor multi-religions, a touchy point of controversy and conflict on many an occasion. However, their affinity to religion as an expression of 'nativeness' gives credence to the proposal to boost the visibility of the ancient trails that have sometimes invited theatrical debates of epic proportions as conduits for exchanges between religious leaders and scholars. The Buddhist circuit, the Ramayana, the Murugan, the Shiva Shakthi trails, and the Vailankanni trail will surely attract the religiously minded.

India stepping in to provide enhanced training and educational opportunities in India for Sri Lankans, including those from the plantation sector, by increasing the number of scholarships from the Government of India (ICCR) and other private universities of repute would make a significant impact in altering attitudes and spurring local support towards a regularly mistrusted neighbor. Similarly, of importance is strengthening technological and scientific cooperation between Sri Lanka and India under the framework of the India – Sri Lanka Joint Science and Technology Committee. The fourth mission goal would be a game-changer to replace and influence skewed perceptions through positive outreach and networking.

Mission Goal 5: Project a more positive image of Sri Lanka in India through public diplomacy initiatives, with a view to reaching out to the people of India and strengthening people to people contacts

Image building seems to be the objective of the fifth mission goal, a spillover from the soft power initiatives of lubricating relations. The proposal to enhance cooperation between think tanks, media outlets and media personnel, scholars, and artists has prevailed and led to some creative and intellectually stimulating mutually beneficial output. They have also provided a degree of extra visibility for Sri Lanka through influencers. One of the highlights of the proposed tasks is to mark the 80th anniversary of the establishment of official relations between Sri Lanka and India, the centenary of the first visit of Rabindranath Tagore to Sri Lanka, and the

75th anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. Moragoda proposes to use social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter to effectively promote Sri Lanka and project a positive image in India. In the future, the diplomatic missions in India will use the two platforms at least once daily to post promotional content on Sri Lanka, including messages on every key cultural/ religious event of India and the states, to reach out to the broader public audience.

Mission Goal 6: Enhance connectivity between Sri Lanka and India

Enhancing connectivity between India and Sri Lanka by facilitating increased air and sea connectivity between the two countries, targeting Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrims to India, outbound Indian tourists, and air cargo will promote more people-to-people interaction, trade, and tourism. That, in turn, contributes to making Sri Lanka an aviation hub and a gateway to South Asia. Increasing the number of destinations in India by the national carrier of Sri Lanka is also deemed important in this regard. Pursuing the resumption/ establishment of passenger ferry services between Sri Lanka and India, between Thalaimannar and Rameswaram, Colombo and Tuticorin and Kankesanthurai and Karaikal, is seen as an opportunity to intensify more people-to-people contacts between southern India and Sri Lanka. As Sri Lanka has little choice but to adopt renewable energy sources to mitigate the effects of climate change, the proposal to facilitate electrical grid connectivity between the two countries is a farsighted and proactive attempt by Sri Lanka. It’s an indication of its preparedness to obtain electricity in the event of droughts, breakdowns, and maintenance. Further, facilitating projects to create enhanced digital connectivity between the two countries to better utilize the underutilized e-commerce platforms and e-payment gateways by Sri Lanka may well encourage a swell in business benefitting both countries, especially in the post-Covid setting.

Mission Goal 7: Promote Sri Lanka’s interests in protecting its ocean resources

As maritime neighbors, fishermen and fishing issues between India and Sri Lanka are often dubbed intractable. The daggers’ drawn approach is becoming a persistent problem between the two countries. Despite the maritime border agreement signed by the two countries in 1947, there seems to be scant regard by Indian fishermen to such legal boundaries. They continue to blatantly trespass into Sri Lankan territorial waters to deny local fishermen of their livelihoods, which has led to intense standoffs, arrests, and detentions by the Sri Lanka Navy.

There’s a call for an engagement at the highest level to stop illegal poaching by Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters and the ecological damage of bottom trawling. The approach, it seems, has to be through a consultative process that arrives at a mechanism acceptable to all sides for a resolution.

While growing activity in the oceans helps increase prosperity worldwide, the recent lesson that Sri Lanka learned was that it is the same human activity that’s also responsible for the degradation of marine ecosystems and destroying livelihoods. Thus, the objective of proposing a training center is to obtain Indian expertise to assist in handling such future maritime disasters, where much depends on the initial response during an incident. If engaged in joint endeavors, Sri Lanka could benefit much from Indian expertise in research in fisheries and other marine and mineral resources. Sri Lanka stands to gain much through this kind of cooperation if its scientists and experts receive opportunities for stationing onboard Indian research vessels.

Even after decades of close collaboration on maritime issues, in the process of achieving success in many areas, it is beholden upon India and Sri Lanka to continue the dialogue to seek sustainable and long-lasting solutions to these challenges. In the meantime, exploiting and leveraging the opportunities provided by proximity will be for the good of both countries. Notwithstanding the deadlocks in maritime-related matters, cooperation is Sri Lanka’s gateway to future prosperity and security. It’s a common quip that a human can’t choose their family. Equally, a country cannot select its neighbor. But it can decide how it’s going to live with its neighbor. In that perspective, one hopes that the Integrated Country Strategy for Sri Lanka Diplomatic Missions in India 2021/2023 will be a potential game-changer by creating new possibilities for engagement, leading to a fundamentally altered new landscape in Indo-Lanka relations.