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“Friend, Competitor, Threat¹”

Making Sense of Sri Lankan Perceptions of India

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Abstract

Sri Lanka’s perceptions of India have been shaped by several factors. These in turn have deeply impacted the course of relations between the two countries. This working paper seeks to understand some of these perceptions from Sri Lanka’s point of view. Since independence, the island has had to come to terms with the reality of its neighbour’s power, presence, and capabilities. The paper analyses how relations have evolved from independence to the post-2022 and post-economic crisis period. It tries to answer four questions. *First*, what do Sri Lankan people think of the countries’ relations with India? *Second*, how does this differ from the views of policymakers and political elites in Sri Lanka? *Third*, given these differences, have the views of Sri Lankans on the ground been adequately considered by policymakers, political elites, and powerholders in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis India-Sri Lanka ties or are strategic considerations blocking consideration of ground views? *Fourth*, what must be done to ensure there is less discrepancy of views within Sri Lanka and between India and Sri Lanka?

Introduction

The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka galvanised India to provide its neighbour to the south with nearly USD 4 billion in aid². India intervened in the island’s recovery, going so far as to make representations to international institutions such as the IMF on its behalf³ and making the case abroad for continued engagement with the country⁴. Some analysts, including this writer, have argued that without Indian intervention, Sri Lanka may have become another Lebanon⁵, mired in multiple crises with no road to recovery. The result is that today, despite slow growth and pessimistic predictions about the economy⁶, Sri Lanka is constantly portrayed as a recovery success story.

At the peak of the crisis, a slew of newspaper articles⁷, editorials⁸, and other publications⁹ portrayed India as a crucial factor in Sri Lanka’s recovery process. Statements by Indian¹⁰ and Sri Lankan officials¹¹ reinforced these perceptions and helped New Delhi gain some goodwill in the island-nation. A number of factors, including China’s reticence in its response to the Sri Lankan crisis¹² and the unwillingness of other powerful states to provide aid before the island reached a deal with the IMF, meant that India was also seen as a

neighbour that stepped in to help Sri Lanka in its time of need. This was heralded by some as a turnaround in bilateral relations between the two countries¹³.

However, three years after the crisis, Sri Lankans remain ambivalent in their response to India. There is much gratitude to India's intervention but also some suspicion about its motives. That has been so despite the unprecedented nature of that intervention, the fact that no powerful state has given so much in such a short time to another country. As one analyst noted at the time, India's nearly USD 4 billion contribution to Sri Lanka was not significantly lower than its bilateral aid and assistance in 2021 (USD 7.66 billion) and easily surpassed its contribution to the United Nations between 1947 and 2021 (USD 2.17 billion)¹⁴. Despite this, Sri Lankan views on India do not seem to have drastically changed from 2022.

This paper seeks to understand some of the perceptions that colour Sri Lanka's view of India and of India-Sri Lanka relations. It revolves around four key questions. *First*, what do Sri Lankan people think of relations with India? *Second*, how does this differ from the views of policymakers and political elites in Sri Lanka? *Third*, given these differences, have the views of Sri Lankans on the ground been adequately considered by policymakers, political elites, and powerholders in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis India-Sri Lanka ties? *Fourth*, what must be done to ensure there is less discrepancy of views within Sri Lanka and stronger relationship between Sri Lanka and India?

The paper is divided into four sections. The first discusses Sri Lanka's ties with India since independence and describes how successive Sri Lankan administrations have responded to Delhi. The second considers contemporary perspectives in Sri Lanka regarding India and India-Sri Lanka relations. The third presents two contradictions that have complicated Sri Lankan perceptions of India at present. The fourth presents recommendations for improving bilateral ties from the premise of these perceptions.

Historicising India-Sri Lanka Ties

Sri Lanka's relations with India can be divided into five distinct phases.

In the first phase, between 1948 and 1956, the island-nation was governed by a conservative elite which identified itself more with the West than with India¹⁵. This had ramifications for India-Sri Lanka ties. Statements by the first Prime Minister of the country, D. S. Senanayake¹⁶, and the third, John Kotelawala¹⁷, in fact undergird a fear of and hostility to India.

In terms of foreign policy, the ideological orientation of the Sri Lankan or Ceylonese elite was shaped by the Cold War¹⁸. In its first decade of independent statehood, Sri Lanka lacked a cohesive foreign policy¹⁹. While identifying itself with the West, it was a little flexible regarding relations with other countries, including China and Russia. This was particularly

the case in the early 1950s, when economic pressures forced the island to enter a trade agreement with Beijing²⁰. Yet, it still prioritised relations with Western powers²¹.

The elite's fixation with Cold War binaries proved so abject that one Prime Minister declared he would be born repeatedly in Sri Lanka to fight Communism²². Another banned Soviet literature and disallowed a Soviet football team from visiting the country while deporting those suspected of being communists²³. Irrational as these actions were, they were conditioned by the class character and dependent nature of Sri Lanka's colonial elite²⁴, whose ideology shared much with the rulers of India's princely states that preferred British dominion to a postcolonial Indian government²⁵.

Not surprisingly, this impacted relations between India and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka obtained independence one year after India. Unlike India, it secured independence through negotiations with the British government and constitutional agitation rather than non-violent action²⁶. Despite becoming an independent state, moreover, Sri Lanka ceded foreign affairs and defence to British hands, choosing to be a Dominion rather than a Republic. Some analysts argue that this was because of domestic fears of Indian intervention: that both the elite and the local population were worried about how the country would fare under the shadow of a giant neighbour without security guarantees from another State²⁷.

Two other factors weighed in. The first was the presence of the Tamil community. Since the early 19th century, the British government had imported cheap, indentured labour from South India for work on coffee and tea plantations. Barely a year after independence the Sri Lankan government effectively disenfranchised this population²⁸, one of the reasons being their support at the polls for the Marxist Left²⁹. In public and at election campaigns, the government drummed up chauvinist rhetoric against such groups. That coloured local perceptions of India, given that these groups traced their lineage to India, especially after the Indian leadership helped plantation Tamils form their party, the Ceylon Workers' Congress³⁰.

The second were comments made by Indian officials themselves, on Sri Lanka, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Two of the most striking such comments were made by Nehru and K. M. Panikkar³¹. For the Sri Lankan government, these remarks reflected a tendency on India's side to view Sri Lanka as a part of a larger geographic entity in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, even before independence Sri Lanka's political elites confronted their Indian counterparts on such statements, only to be told that India did not wish to intervene in or colonise the country³². Nevertheless, these perceptions formed a bedrock in relations between the two countries long after independence.

The second phase dates from 1956 to 1977. In Sri Lanka, these decades were dominated by Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Oxford-educated and more Westernised than many of his colleagues³³, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike steered Sri Lanka towards a socialist, anti-imperialist, nationalist direction. After becoming Prime Minister in 1956 he implemented several radical reforms, including the

nationalisation of transport services and the Colombo Port. In foreign affairs, he emphasised non-alignment and what he called “dynamic neutrality.”³⁴ This meant a shift away from his predecessors’ preoccupation with Western powers and a relaxation of ties with Eastern Europe and socialist and communist states. Until his assassination in 1959 he cultivated deep relations with India and formed a personal friendship with Nehru³⁵.

Bandaranaike’s widow Sirimavo continued these associations. The world’s first woman prime minister, she served for three terms, two of which during the 1960s and 1970s saw her steer the country further into the non-aligned camp³⁶.

During her tenure Bandaranaike engaged proactively with India, especially over sensitive issues such as the statelessness of the Tamil population³⁷. It can be argued that her leadership helped bolster India’s image in Sri Lanka, particularly at multilateral forums where India and Sri Lanka engaged on several initiatives. One of the most prominent of these, the declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace³⁸, gained support in both countries, even if it failed to make much headway in later years.³⁹

Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s handling of three matters, in particular, helped maintain bilateral relations while promoting a largely positive, peaceful, and non-interventionist image of India in Sri Lanka. The first was her involvement in negotiations for a ceasefire during the 1962 Sino-Indian War⁴⁰. Travelling to both countries, Bandaranaike tried to bring the two leaders together on a common platform⁴¹. Although these efforts eventually petered out, her intervention did not go unnoticed in India or in China⁴².

The second was her balancing act during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Even though it avowed neutrality in the conflict, Sri Lanka managed to condemn atrocities in the region and eventually recognised the State of Bangladesh. It also allowed Pakistani airplanes to refuel at the country’s main airport at the height of the War⁴³ for over 170 times⁴⁴. In another time and place, such actions would have provoked a furore in Delhi. Bandaranaike, however, defused tensions and did not allow the episode to disrupt relations with India⁴⁵. The same went for negotiations over the disputed Katchatheevu island: the perception was maintained throughout that each country respected the other’s point of view⁴⁶.

The third was her relationship with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Although much has been written about Sri Lanka’s ties with India during these years⁴⁷, there has been very little comment on the friendship between these two leaders. Gandhi and Bandaranaike pursued similar policies and enacted similar reforms in their respective countries. While Indira Gandhi abolished the Privy Purse in 1971, four years later Bandaranaike enforced the most radical set of economic policies, including nationalisations of lands and businesses, in Sri Lanka’s modern history⁴⁸. Both took a lead at international forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement. Both maintained ties with the Soviet Union and had testy relations with the West⁴⁹, especially the United States⁵⁰. Over time these similarities helped the two leaders cement a deeply amiable relationship. Often this translated to positive bilateral ties between the two neighbouring countries.

The third phase, from 1977 to 1994, marked a rupture and deterioration in these ties. The 1977 election brought J. R. Jayewardene to power. A scion of the colonial elite, a contemporary of Bandaranaike, and a deeply Westernised man, Jayewardene professed a distaste for his predecessor's domestic and foreign policy⁵¹. His biographers note that he had little to no enthusiasm for the Non-Aligned Movement and was eager to hand over the chairmanship of the group to Cuba in 1979⁵². He was as eager to realign the country with Western powers, especially the US, UK, and Germany. During these years Sri Lanka became the first South Asian country to liberalise its economy, through a spate of reforms that took the island away from its nonaligned roots into the pro-Western camp⁵³.

This had profound implications for Sri Lanka's relations with India. In his first few years in office Jayewardene enjoyed a warm if cordial friendship with the short-lived Morarji Desai and Charan Singh administrations (1977-1980). During this period Jayewardene made a series of remarks about Indira Gandhi which contributed to a deterioration of bilateral relations upon the latter's return to power in 1980⁵⁴. The 1980s became a test-case for Sri Lanka on how not to conduct relations with India⁵⁵. Departing from its nonaligned past, the island ensconced itself firmly in the US-Western Europe axis, alienating India and threatening its position in the Indian Ocean. The result was that by 1987, when India intervened in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, Jayewardene had become a *bête-noire* in Indira's and her son-and-successor Rajiv Gandhi's eyes⁵⁶.

In 1987, the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) was sent to Sri Lanka to intervene in the ethnic conflict.⁵⁷ In Sri Lanka, this provoked two uprisings, one in the north and the other in the south. The latter, led by the leftwing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was sparked by fears of Indian overreach. The resulting carnage cost tens of thousands of lives, with some estimates placing the death toll at over a hundred thousand⁵⁸. By the time Jayewardene's successor Ranasinghe Premadasa was elected president in 1988, the JVP had popularised anti-Indian sentiment and effectively placed a ban on the import of Indian merchandise. This resulted, among other things, in the shooting of the chairman of the State Pharmaceutical Corporation (SPC), a relative of President Jayewardene, who had continued to ship medicines from India despite the JVP's ban⁵⁹.

Ranasinghe Premadasa's presidency spelt out a transitional period in India-Sri Lanka ties. He negotiated with the Indian government to end IPKF operations in the country's north while aggressively quelling the JVP insurrection in the country's south⁶⁰. By this point the Indian military, renowned for its near-unblemished record, was suffering casualties at the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main Tamil guerilla outfit in Sri Lanka. Their departure, brought on by a series of strategic miscalculations vis-a-vis the LTTE, was followed by a series of assassinations by the LTTE, including of Rajiv Gandhi (1991) and Premadasa (1993) himself⁶¹.

The fourth phase, from 1994 to 2007, saw a normalisation of ties under President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who during her first term (1994-1999) appointed her mother Sirimavo

Bandaranaike as Prime Minister⁶². A believer in South Asian solidarity and particularly of organisations like SAARC⁶³, Kumaratunga, as executive president, handled a largely positive period in India - Sri Lanka relations. During her tenure a series of agreements were negotiated, including a landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA)⁶⁴⁶⁵. Though such agreements ran into complications later⁶⁶, they did not provoke resistance among Sri Lankans against Indians at the time.

The fifth and current phase, from 2007, is perhaps the most complex and difficult to chart. The first Mahinda Rajapaksa administration (2005 - 2009) oversaw a reorientation in Sri Lanka's foreign policy, against the backdrop of a civil war. The Mahinda Rajapaksa government expanded ties with China⁶⁷, though it maintained goodwill with India⁶⁸. This led to knock-on-impacts on the country's foreign policy. Rightly or wrongly, Rajapaksa was seen as coveting friendship with China as a counter against Indian influence. That led commentators to cast him as a pro-China presidential figure⁶⁹.

Perceptions of Colombo's proximity to China continued even after Rajapaksa's defeat at presidential polls in 2015⁷⁰. The governments that came to power after his defeat in 2015 focused on balancing relations between India and China⁷¹. Yet, incidents like the leasing out of the Hambantota Port in the island's southern province to a Chinese company in 2017 indicate⁷² such a balance has been elusive at best and impossible to maintain at worst.

Even though then President Mahinda Rajapakse tried to convince the Indian government that his "Chinese tilt" was not aimed against India⁷³, Indian officials did not seem to have been taken in by his statements. To give one example, when Sri Lanka organised a Commonwealth Summit in 2013, New Delhi took the extraordinary step of pulling out of it. At least one commentator speculated that Delhi's decision was sparked by allegations of growing Chinese influence in the island⁷⁴, even though the UK- India relationship may have been a factor in New Delhi's decision.

Over two subsequent administrations – Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2020-2022) and Ranil Wickremesinghe (2022-2024), especially the latter – the Sri Lankan government laid the groundwork for integration with India on the economic, political, and technological front. What is interesting about these reforms is how the Wickremesinghe government presented them – for instance, proposals for power and energy connectivity with India – as part of its reforms for recovery and privatisation and deregulation of power and energy⁷⁵. Even more interesting has been the willingness of the current National People's Power (NPP) administration of Anura Kumara Dissanayake to continue these policies, with only minor changes.

Indian Aid and Ambivalence from Sri Lanka

In its response to the scale of Indian aid during the economic crisis in 2022, one could discern a level of ambivalence in Sri Lanka and among Sri Lankans.

At Gotagogama in Galle Face, Colombo, where protesters had been lodged since April 2022, people were quite divided on Indian aid. Some were grateful towards the country for having stepped in at a crucial time, while others argued that India could use the aid it was giving to Sri Lanka to its advantage, perhaps by forcing Sri Lanka to reorient its foreign policy⁷⁶ There were those who expressed anger at China for landing Sri Lanka into a debt crisis and harbouring dubious intentions: an anger that manifested itself acutely in a graffiti near the China-Sri Lanka managed Colombo Port City which, in no unequivocal terms, read “Free Tibet.”⁷⁷

With shipments of fuel, medicine, and other commodities streaming in from India, many Sri Lankans who had lodged to protest in Colombo cautioned against depending too much on one country⁷⁸. This seemed to be borne out by certain developments. For instance, in June 2022, the Indian government delayed a third fuel credit line over non-payments for previous credit lines. Almost immediately, queues for petrol and diesel which had disappeared, ballooned again, and protesters began walking back on the streets⁷⁹.

At the level of the political leadership, however, perceptions of India were largely positive, if not laudatory. From the Sri Lankan President⁸⁰ to the Indian High Commissioner⁸¹, the sentiment was that India cared deeply about Sri Lanka and did not abandon its neighbour at its hour of need. In both the Sri Lankan and Indian parliaments, this sentiment was expressed at the highest levels, along with statements that without India, Sri Lanka’s crisis would have been far worse than what it became⁸².

In the run up to last year’s presidential elections, sections of the Sri Lankan media reported an absence of anti-Indian sentiment vis-a-vis the then government’s proposals for integration with India⁸³. Instead, integration with India was heralded as a way forward by President Ranil Wickremesinghe, and it figured in several election campaigns⁸⁴.

While certain opposition parties criticised such proposals, framing them as a sellout to foreign agenda⁸⁵, others promoted the idea of economic convergence with the country⁸⁶. The fact that India had, only two years prior, made a critical intervention and sweeping contribution in Sri Lanka’s recovery simply did not seem to matter, even to those who had acknowledged it during the crisis.

These developments suggest a discrepancy between grassroots and political elite perceptions of and responses to India. The question of what explains such discrepancies should be viewed from the perspective of a much more relevant issue: what are Sri Lankan perceptions of India, what have shaped them, and how have they shaped bilateral relations across time.

Historical Baggage

In understanding Sri Lankan perceptions of India, three perspectives, in particular, will be considered here.

The first lies in the realm of *legend* and *myth*. It is often said, by Sri Lankans on the ground and at the highest official levels, that Sri Lanka and India share a common history and a shared destiny⁸⁷. Yet Sri Lankans and Indians tend to view each other through the prism of myths, legends, and folktales, reinterpreting these stories to present each country as the moral and physical superior of the other. The most prominent of these stories is the *Ramayana*. While several versions of the story exist through the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asian countries like Indonesia⁸⁸ only one version has gained credence among nationalist groups in Sri Lanka: the version where the final battle takes place in Sri Lanka, between Rama and Ravana, ending in defeat for the latter.

This version of the *Ramayana* is highly problematic. Sri Lankan writers have noted that the country or region identified in the myth may not be Sri Lanka at all⁸⁹. The *Dasaratha Jatakaya*, for instance, apart from depicting Rama and Sita as siblings rather than a married couple⁹⁰, has the story's protagonists removed by the eponymous king to the Himalayas⁹¹. Yet the popular versions of the story that pit the prince from India against the king of Lanka persist in common memory.

Myths are ahistorical if not antihistorical. Yet at one level, they have a profound bearing on the present. The *Ramayana* is invoked not just by nationalist groups but also by political analysts in Sri Lanka⁹². The Sri Lankan and Indian governments, too, have framed the story – despite its black-and-white view of both countries – as a basis for cultural relations. The *Ramayana Trail*, for instance, popular among Indian tourists and Sri Lankan travellers, features sites in Sri Lanka associated with the popular *Ramayana*⁹³.

This Janus-faced nature of the *Ramayana* has dictated Sri Lankan perceptions of India as a big brother and an overbearing neighbour, despite political officials calling it a “common cultural narrative⁹⁴” for both countries. Claims that the *Ramayana Trail* erases Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage⁹⁵, a rallying cry among Sinhala nationalists, for instance, have always been made⁹⁶, with nationalist ideologues complaining that the *Ramayana* reinforces Indian dominance at the expense of the Sri Lankan hero Ravana⁹⁷. The cult of Ravana, despite local historians and archaeologists pointing to the lack of a historical basis for the story, has dominated nationalist discourses in the country⁹⁸: no less than the Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka has purported to lead research on prehistoric “aviation routes⁹⁹.”

The second lies in the realm of *history* and *religion*. Sri Lanka and India share two main religious links, Hinduism and Buddhism. Indian intervention proved crucial for the transmission of both to Sri Lanka. But the history surrounding them has only complicated relations between the two countries.

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC through an intervention by Emperor Asoka's son Mahinda¹⁰⁰. This story of Mahinda's arrival in Sri Lanka is related in the *Mahavamsa*, the 5th century AD Sri Lankan Pali Chronicle which stands as the first written historical record of its kind in South Asia¹⁰¹. Hinduism, which with other faiths like Jainism

existed in some form even after the spread of Buddhism, was more firmly established 13 centuries later, following the Chola conquests of the 10th and 11th centuries AD¹⁰².

In the popular consciousness in Sri Lanka, the latter essentially uprooted the former: the Chola conquest signalled an end, even if temporary, of Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage. The irony is that both episodes – Buddhism's introduction and Buddhism's displacement – took place in the same region, Anuradhapura, in Sri Lanka's north-central province, and with the sanction of two great Indian powers, the Mauryan and the Chola Empires.

Today the Chola and subsequent South Indian invasions are presented as traumatic episodes in Sri Lanka, even in school textbooks. Despite historians cautioning against such narratives and arguing that these invasions were more nuanced and complex than the binaries of popular historiography may suggest¹⁰³, the trope of a big neighbour tying its tentacles around a small, vulnerable island has become mainstream.

To give one example, a year before India intervened militarily in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, in 1987, the leader of the militant Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Rohana Wijeweera, published a pamphlet on the conflict which portrayed India as an imperialist hegemon taking advantage of the conflict and resuming a centuries-old policy of external invasion and internal fragmentation. Whatever the merits of Wijeweera's argument may have been, these views have only become more popular over time, in particular over issues such as the Katchateevu island¹⁰⁴ and the much-disputed 13th amendment¹⁰⁵. More recent initiatives such as India's proposed digital e-NIC scheme have also raised concerns¹⁰⁶.

Far from assuaging such fears as some may have thought, the 2022 debt crisis and India's assistance only deepened them in other ways. The fear was that Indian largesse, in the form of fuel credit lines and shipments of medicine, fertiliser, and dry rations, came at a price. As Hirun Matheesha, an undergraduate at the University of Colombo, argues, "India's intervention was viewed positively, but it also brought about a sense of unease among Sri Lankans¹⁰⁷."

The third dimension is *economic and physical*, or to be more specific, economic and physical *integration*. Integration with India is a prospect that has been recommended by policy and political elites, including economists and heads of state, for a long time, dating back to at least the Chandrika Kumaratunga period when the Free Trade Agreement was being signed. Until 2022, however, this became an election brownie point between the country's main political parties: while the government in power touted its benefits, the Opposition would frame it as a sellout to a foreign country.

The 2022 crisis ruptured this trend. For the first time since 2020, mainstream political parties – sections of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)¹⁰⁸, the United National Party (UNP) headed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe¹⁰⁹, and the main Opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB)¹¹⁰ – spoke openly in favour of integration with India.

Integration here was framed from different vantage points: currency, technological, political, even physical. Speaking of the controversial presence of Adani Group in several large-scale projects, Sri Lanka's then Foreign Minister Ali Sabry described them as a "government-to-government kind of project"¹¹¹, pointing out that the Indian government had chosen the investor for the deal. This was echoed in allegations that a key energy project had been handed to Adani after Prime Minister Modi pressured then Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa¹¹².

Former Minister Sabry's description of the Adani deal as a government-to-government project was problematic for at least two reasons. First, Adani's presence in Sri Lanka was mainly in the Colombo port and in power and energy, sectors that for many Sri Lankans were inextricably linked to the country's security and sovereignty.

Second, his statement suggested that Colombo and Delhi were going ahead with the deal without being cognizant of popular perceptions of these reforms. Although several Ministers from the SLPP-Wickremesinghe era saw nothing wrong in such transactions¹¹³, for a majority of Sri Lankans who voted against the regime in September 2024 it both reinforced fears of domestic sectors being swamped by India and added to their anger at a government they felt had lost its mandate in 2022¹¹⁴.

Meanwhile, policy elites, including economists, kept on writing about the benefits of closer integration¹¹⁵, even as Sri Lankans on the ground felt differently. This rift between policy elite prescriptions and ground realities was present at so many levels and on so many fronts, and nowhere was it more obvious that the SLPP-Wickremesinghe regime's plans for physical connectivity with India, framed in terms of freer movement between the two countries. If economic integration could be defended at least on the grounds of economic principles, physical connectivity proved much harder to justify.

Among the many initiatives seen through by the SLPP-Wickremesinghe government in this regard was the resumption of ferry services between the island's northern province and Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu¹¹⁶. These paved the way for more ambitious schemes, including the construction of an over-sea bridge – the Ram-Setu Bridge.

Such proposals have long histories: the over-sea bridge, for instance, has been at least 20 years in the making¹¹⁷. Yet deep-seated fears of Indian migration from a national security perspective prevented successive Sri Lankan administrations from carrying it out.

The SLPP-Wickremesinghe government came closest to achieving these plans, as reflected in an India-Lanka Vision Statement signed in July 2023¹¹⁸. But local civil society opposition – particularly over fears that India could use such projects to tilt the country in its favour on regional and geopolitical issues – derailed them. As Dr Dayan Jayatilleka, a Sri Lankan political analyst and former Ambassador, observed at the time, such connectivity would render the security offered to Sri Lanka by dint of being an island worthless¹¹⁹. Fittingly enough, in his critique Jayatilleka invoked Ramayanist rhetoric.

“In The Iliad of Asia, the Ramayana, the mythical monkey-God Hanuman had to build an artificial bridge between India and the island of Lanka so that a hostile force could cross and defeat Ravana, the great Lankan leader. Hanuman’s bridge was the equivalent of Ulysses’ Trojan Horse. Had this island been physically contiguous with the subcontinent, Buddhism would not have found a durable refuge here when it had been reversed in India after the glorious Ashokan era, and the Mahavamsa would have had a more tragic tale to tell or may not have existed at all¹²⁰.”

One of the more ubiquitous sources of this unease among both young and old Sri Lankans, according to Hirun Matheesha, has been India’s invocation of Akhand Bharat, which in the Hindutva imagination encompasses Sri Lanka.

While Akhand Bharat may or may not be a reality, for many Sri Lankans it appears as a key part of India’s foreign policy¹²¹, an echo of Nehru’s and Panikkar’s remarks from nearly a century ago. This is a perception that will not go away no matter how vigorously Indian policy elites dismiss it unless Sri Lankans convince themselves that it will not affect their country¹²². Given that Indian intervention in Sri Lanka is portrayed as a traumatic episode in its history, and prehistory, in school textbooks, this idea is far more ingrained in Sri Lankan thought than it sometimes appears.

It goes without saying that while prioritising ties with India, the current government has become more sensitive to these perceptions. Weeks after Anura Kumara Dissanayake visited India and met Prime Minister Modi, Colombo announced it was cancelling a wind power deal that had been earlier awarded to Adani¹²³. As for an over-sea bridge, the NPP government has reportedly informed Delhi that Sri Lanka is not ready for it yet¹²⁴. Which, perhaps, is a sign that it will not come up for discussion soon. As one analyst puts it, “[a] land bridge implies permanence, dependence, and an implicit ceding of strategic autonomy¹²⁵.”

The ambiguity in Sri Lankan perceptions has continued with more recent developments suggesting a thawing of these perceptions in favour of a more positive image of India in Sri Lanka. The most important and striking case study here is New Delhi’s response to Cyclone Ditwah. Despatching aid, assistance, engineers, and infrastructure repair teams, the Indian government launched Operation Sagar Bandhu just hours after Ditwah struck Sri Lanka.

India went to extraordinary lengths to assist Sri Lanka. Apart from responding swiftly to the humanitarian crisis and infrastructure damage, it opened its airspace to Pakistan: the first time since the Pahalgam attacks. While Pakistan accused India of not giving it sufficient lead time to dispatch humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka, the fact that India made such an effort, and went to such lengths, because of its small neighbour to the south, stands out and was commented on by several regional and international analysts.

What is interesting about the whole operation is that, on the ground too, India was able to amplify positive perceptions of itself in the island nation. While some political ideologues questioned why Indian military assistance was needed when Sri Lanka had a sizable army, these insinuations proved to be - at least on social media - a minority. Indeed, India's response to Cyclone Ditwah shows that alignment between elite and grassroots perceptions in Sri Lanka is possible - and is within reach: a winning of hearts and minds which can well be a guide for both countries to chart a better future for their relationship.

Contemporary Challenges

The example of Sagar Bhandu leads to two further questions. First, what is the state of India-Sri Lanka ties today? Second, what factors are influencing the bilateral relationship?

A good vantage point from which to attempt to answer these questions would be two divergent views of two young Sri Lankans. The first, Rumeth Jayasinghe, a management undergraduate at the University of Peradeniya, argued that "if in 2007 India did not come forward when Sri Lanka asked for its help to establish harbour facilities in the Hambantota district, in 2022 it came forward when we fell into a crisis¹²⁶." The second, Hirun Matheesha, from the University of Colombo, observed that "India is the way forward for South Asia, but Sri Lankans feel we must be cautious in dealing with them¹²⁷." In the one there was much optimism about India's motives; in the other, a note of caution.

Both interviewees positively affirmed India's role in Sri Lanka and the world, particularly in the realm of information technology¹²⁸. Even if the second interviewee reinforced some caution, both fully acknowledged New Delhi's growing clout in several areas and agreed that the Sri Lankan government of 2022-2024 were correct in trying to "plug" Sri Lanka into the former's economic success. Jayasinghe, in particular, noted that India's contributions to Sri Lanka went beyond the economic-material angle; in particular, he noted Buddhism as "India's greatest export¹²⁹."

However, at the same time, they argued that many Sri Lankans believe India should do more in the Global South and must engage more proactively with organisations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation¹³⁰. They stated that last year's BRICS Summit, where India and China began discussions on taking forward their relationship, and the recent SCO Summit, where Chinese and Indian delegations took these talks even further at a bilateral level, were developments broadly welcomed in Sri Lanka. This was so, they added, since China-India unity is seen as a crucial step towards reinforcing Global South unity, against developments such as US President Donald Trump's tariffs¹³¹.

Even the present government, when it was in opposition, acknowledged the scale of India's contribution during the crisis¹³², implicitly conceding that relations with India are a factor that Sri Lanka cannot underestimate. However, Sri Lanka lies at a crossroads in the Indian Ocean. The decisions it takes have ramifications on bilateral relations. The problem

fundamentally is one of what stance it must take on issues affecting the region. The perception at home is that, as far as such issues is concerned, Sri Lanka must remain nonaligned¹³³. Easy as this may be in theory, however, adhering to it has been difficult¹³⁴.

The Pahalgam attacks are one case in point¹³⁵. After the attacks Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake called Indian Prime Minister Modi and offered his condolences¹³⁶. At a press conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka's Media Minister Nalinda Jayatissa also expressed condolences and stated that the government opposed terrorism of any form¹³⁷.

Around this time a protest was organised in front of the Pakistani High Commission in Colombo; the protesters accused Islamabad of training terrorists¹³⁸. These developments did not go well with Pakistan, which reportedly questioned Sri Lanka's neutrality over the issue¹³⁹. On the other hand, at the time of the attacks, a Sri Lankan defence delegation met their counterparts in Islamabad¹⁴⁰, raising eyebrows in Delhi. This was after, just weeks before, Colombo had called off a naval exercise with Pakistan in Trincomalee due to Indian concerns¹⁴¹.

On a larger scale, the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific also looms over India-Sri Lanka ties. This has been so because, over the last few months, the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific have undergone a subtle yet profound change¹⁴². For Sri Lanka, whereas the Indo-Pacific was earlier seen as a site of competition between China and India, the latter supported by the US, today the spat between Washington and Delhi has made its balancing act in the region much more difficult.

How these balancing acts will have to be done in future will depend on Sri Lanka and its foreign policy apparatus. In August 2022, for instance, fears of a Chinese research vessel docking in Hambantota caused much anxiety in Delhi¹⁴³. In 2024, the Sri Lankan government took steps to formulate a "national policy" on visits by foreign research vessels¹⁴⁴. As the Foreign Minister back then, Ali Sabry, related, "the challenge was to make clear that the visits cannot continue, without angering any party¹⁴⁵."

Laudable as this goal may be, it is a challenge Sri Lanka has not been capable of meeting in the recent past because of bureaucratic and institutional lethargy¹⁴⁶. Moreover, such initiatives may be crucial in the wider context of prioritising relations with New Delhi, but they have had an impact on Colombo's domestic needs.

For instance, the foreign research vessel policy targeted Chinese ships. As one Sri Lankan analyst has recently argued, this had a negative impact on Sri Lankan universities, since they depended on partnerships with Beijing "for marine research¹⁴⁷." While the Delhi government had justifiable reasons to worry about foreign ships in its backyard, the reality is that Sri Lanka has its own needs to look after.

India and Sri Lanka will have to come into some understanding on these matters, especially as the Indo-Pacific becomes more complex in world politics and India charts a new course for itself in the region.

The silver lining to this is that there are several convergences between India's and Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Both countries enjoy robust ties across the Global South, with countries like Russia and Brazil. The recent thawing of relations between Delhi and Beijing¹⁴⁸, has opened possibilities for Sri Lanka's relations with both countries. Moreover, except for New Delhi's ambiguous ties with China (what former Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale calls a state of "armed coexistence"¹⁴⁹), Sri Lanka and India see eye-to-eye on many foreign policy matters, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The Domestic Political Angle

The 2022 crisis in Sri Lanka revealed a massive gulf in aspirations and perceptions between policymakers, policy elites, and officials, and the people on the ground. This paper argues that regardless of developments since - most significantly, Cyclone Ditwah and Operation Sagar Bhandu - this ambivalence remains.

Indeed, the rift between elites and people on the ground within Sri Lanka has survived the post-2022 recovery of the economy. While the recovery itself was lauded as a success story by international media, multilateral institutions, and foreign diplomats, the reforms that were undertaken by the then government polarised Sri Lankan society. The government did communicate that these reforms were needed and that they would spur recovery¹⁵⁰.

Yet the results of the September 2024 elections suggest that a majority of voters did not see things this way¹⁵¹. If at all, as Dr Rajni Gamage, a Sri Lankan political researcher based at the Institute of South Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore, has observed, recent developments in Sri Lanka, including the arrest of former president Ranil Wickremesinghe, have reinforced these polarisations¹⁵².

While foreign officials including a veteran Indian Congress Party MP called on the government to release the former president¹⁵³, Sri Lankans angrily took to social media to respond to such posts¹⁵⁴. Sri Lankans themselves were not spared such anger: a local public policy specialist, questioning the merits of the arrest, was rebuffed by fellow citizens on Twitter, one of whom called him a "lackey"¹⁵⁵. Not surprisingly, the mirage of recovery that was offered by policy elites and political officials, which vanished at the 2024 elections, is no longer holding Sri Lanka together as it did under the Wickremesinghe government¹⁵⁶.

Policy Recommendations

Given these challenges, the paper makes three recommendations with respect to addressing ambivalences in Sri Lankan perceptions of India.

The first recommendation is that both India's and Sri Lanka's strategic, political, diplomatic, and academic elite need to consider how aspects of the bilateral relationship which can be framed positively can equally be framed negatively by the public, and more importantly, how historical and mythological episodes can be telescoped to the present, which can have a negative bearing on that relationship.

This is true, for instance, of events like the IPKF's involvement in the Sri Lankan civil war, the issue with fishing waters in northern Sri Lanka/ Southern India, and talk of economic integration. In reality, these incidents are reflective of much older factors, which this paper has highlighted above. However, there are linkages between them. Indian intervention, even if positive, is framed from a negative perspective, as a *continuum* from the *Ramayana*. The same goes for the fishermen issue, not to mention the Katchatheevu island dispute. For a more constructive approach to the problem of managing Sri Lankan perceptions of India, India and Sri Lanka thus need to be aware of these factors and build up on them.

The second recommendation is to look at alternative, smaller, and more effective ways of solidifying bilateral ties which will not be viewed negatively or hostilely by political elites or people on the ground. India's response to Cyclone Dittwah in Sri Lanka is one good example. It can be argued that scenes of Indian military and humanitarian workers rescuing people and repairing infrastructure alongside Sri Lankan aid workers and armed forces resonated much more strongly across Sri Lanka than its intervention during the 2022 economic crisis. This was largely because, as one interviewee suggested, "Unlike 2022, when India's efforts were mediated at elite political and diplomatic levels, here people actually saw Indians on the ground, helping their Sri Lankan counterparts to rescue Sri Lankans¹⁵⁷."

Another good example of how "small gestures and commonalities can go a long way¹⁵⁸" in elevating these perceptions and benefitting the relationship is Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya's visit to New Delhi¹⁵⁹. The visit, which followed a tour of China¹⁶⁰, saw Colombo make use of the Prime Minister's India connections to project goodwill in India. Sharing platforms with Narendra Modi¹⁶¹ and feted by her old university, Hindu College¹⁶² Amarasuriya spoke on the need to maintain Indo-Lanka relations at multiple levels. While then President Wickremesinghe also made a visit to India in 2023, this was limited to meetings with his Indian counterparts¹⁶³ and led to some controversy in Sri Lanka¹⁶⁴. Amarasuriya's tour, by contrast, generated more media visibility and did not attract any controversy.

The third recommendation would be an independent audit of Sri Lankan perceptions of India at grassroots level. This is especially relevant given that a recent survey was conducted on what "young India" thinks of Sri Lanka¹⁶⁵. The main takeaway is that trust levels between the two countries have improved. The Indian respondents seemed more positive in this regard in 2024 relative to 2023. In general, they felt very confident about the relationship¹⁶⁶.

One analyst points out several reasons for the overall uptick. These include “economic and political stabilisation”, an “increase in bilateral cooperation”, and a “continued push for connectivity.” He concludes that, despite certain issues, there is “support for India’s Sri Lanka policy”, which is grounded in Narendra Modi’s “Neighbourhood First” policy and its containment of China¹⁶⁷.

There is little doubt that these developments have helped Indians view Sri Lanka more positively. Yet the impact of cultural tropes and publications, such as school textbooks that showcase India as an invader, has had a bearing on the minds of the Sri Lankans and, for better or worse, still determines how Sri Lankans view India.

In that sense, while economic and political stabilisation may have contributed to a positive image of Sri Lanka in India, in Sri Lanka it has generated much unrest and polarisation. And while connectivity is viewed positively in India, perhaps because India is initiating the push, in Sri Lanka it is viewed with some suspicion, as civil society protests against integration in areas like power and energy in the country’s north and east make clear¹⁶⁸. Both instances, as mentioned in the paper, stem from the fear of India as an invader, something that finds repeated mention in Sri Lankan textbooks and even the press.

The importance of these recommendations cannot be stressed enough. The experience of the 2022-2024 government, its rhetoric on recovery and visions for the future versus its defeat at last year’s elections, has served as a cautious reminder that perceptions make a stronger impact than on ground reality.

Conclusion

This paper argues that, since 2022, there has been a sea-change in India’s role and presence in Sri Lanka. However, despite its intervention and contribution in the island’s economic recovery, domestic perceptions about India seem to have undergone little if any change. By contrast, a perusal of the history of Sri Lanka - India relations shows that both countries have defined and viewed each other through the prism of certain factors. In the current context, Sri Lankans’ views on India are mediated at three levels: the realm of legend and myth; of history, and religion; and of economic and physical integration. All three are interconnected and interwoven. Sri Lanka also faces two major pressures at home: the compulsion to remain neutral and nonaligned on regional issues, and the rift between the country’s “strategic elite” and the people on the ground.

This paper argues that Sri Lanka and India need to be mindful of perceptions of each other. Indeed, given its changing relations with other countries in the region - including Pakistan, Maldives, and Bangladesh - Sri Lanka is viewed as an all-weather ally by India, perhaps the only country in the region that does not project an immediate threat to New Delhi. It is only by being cognizant of India’s changing interests that Sri Lanka can take advantage of the benefits a closer relationship with India can bring.

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