



## Pakistan-Sri Lanka and India

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### Why in News

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Recently, **Pakistan's Prime Minister visited Sri Lanka**. It is the first Pakistani PM visit to Sri Lanka since 2016 and first visit by any head of government to Sri Lanka since the **Covid-19** pandemic began.

### Key Points

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- **Sri Lanka-Pakistan Relationship (Background):**
  - **Trade:**

Sri Lanka and Pakistan have a **free trade agreement** dating back to 2005. **Pakistan is Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner** in South Asia **after India**.
  - **Culture:**

Over the last decade, **Pakistan** has also tried to work on a cultural connection with Sri Lanka by **highlighting its ancient Buddhist connections and sites**.
  - **Defence Cooperation:**
    - Defence ties are a **strong pillar** of the Sri Lanka-Pakistan bilateral relationship.
    - During the 1971 Indo-Pak war, Sri Lanka allowed refuelling of Pakistani Jets.
    - In its **Civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** in 2009, Sri Lanka turned to Pakistan for arms and ammunition, as well as training for its fighter pilots, in the last stages of the war.
    - Recently, Sri Lanka participated in **Pakistan's multi-nation naval exercise Aman-21**.

- **About the Visit:**
  - **Defence Credit Line Facility:**  
Pakistan has offered a **USD 50 million new credit line to Sri Lanka** to boost cooperation in defence and security sectors.
  - **Enhancing Cultural Ties:**
    - Pakistan **will set up a centre for the study of Asian cultures and civilisation at Peradeniya University** in Kandy.
    - Sri Lanka also **named a sports institute in Colombo after Pakistan's PM**, highlighting the cricket connection between the two countries.
- **Significance of the Visit:**
  - **For Pakistan:**  
**Enhancing Trade Ties:**  
Pakistan invited Sri Lanka to “take advantage” of the **China Pakistan Economic Corridor** to enhance trade ties. In the past, Colombo had pitched for an economic corridor overland for access to countries beyond.
  - **For Sri Lanka:**
    - **Seeking Support in UNHRC:**
      - Recently, Sri Lanka has made an appeal to the member states of the **United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)** to reject the impending resolution on the island nation's human rights accountability and reconciliation.
      - Sri Lanka is facing a **new UNHRC resolution** calling on it to hold human rights abusers to account and deliver justice to victims of the **26-year civil war (1983-2009)** between the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government and the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** insurgent group fighting for Tamilian minorities.
    - **Balancing Ties with India and Pakistan:**
      - It provided an opportunity to Sri Lanka to balance its ties with India and Pakistan.
      - Sri Lanka **cancelled Pakistan's PM address** to the Parliament over concerns that he would **raise the Kashmir issue**.
    - **Repairing Anti-Muslim Image:**
      - This visit may repair the damage of Sri Lanka's image in the Islamic world as it recently **denied burials of bodies of Muslims who have died of Covid-19**.
      - **Muslims**, who make up about **11% of Sri Lanka's population**, have had **tense relations with the Sinhala Buddhist majority** for much of the last decade, with riots shattering the uneasy calm every few years.

- **Hamper Efforts of Isolating Pakistan:**
  - As Sri Lanka's closest neighbour with strong, all encompassing ties, India has not perceived Pakistan as a serious rival in Colombo so far.
  - However, this visit signalled that despite India's best efforts at "isolating" Pakistan, it has friends in the neighbourhood.
- **Increasing Closeness to China:**

Pakistan's PM visit soon after **Sri Lanka's abrupt withdrawal from a tripartite agreement** (along with Japan and India) for the development of the **East Container Terminal at Colombo port**, and the award of a **contract to a Chinese company** to set up a **hybrid renewable energy** in an island off Jaffna is a reason for concern for India.
- **Threatening India's Interests in Indian Ocean Region:**
  - Increasing convergence of interests between Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region is a matter of concern.
  - Sri Lanka's role is central in accomplishment of India's strategic vision (**SAGAR**) for the Indian Ocean, and countering China's **String of Pearls** strategy.
  - Pakistan's extension of the line of credit to Sri Lanka comes close on the heels of **India extending USD 50 million line of credit to neighbouring Maldives** for strengthening navy capabilities and **USD 100 million to Mauritius** for shoring up coastal defences.
- **Connectivity:**
  - The Gwadar port is connected to China's Xinjiang province by the CPEC which in turn is a strand of the ambitious multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative launched by China in 2013.
  - The latest invitation to Sri Lanka from Pakistan comes as **India is trying to get work restarted on Chabahar port in Iran** which New Delhi sees as a route to landlocked Central Asia and Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan.
- **Concerns over Radicalisation by Pakistan:**

Sporadically, the Indian security establishment has voiced concerns about Pakistan's role in the radicalisation of Muslims — especially in Eastern Sri Lanka.

## Way Forward

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- Sri Lanka has learnt to balance its ties with India and Pakistan expertly, signalling to both that it treats the two relationships separately. India too should not get threatened by Sri Lanka-Pakistan ties instead it should readjust alignments in its interests. **Reviving a trilateral maritime dialogue with Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2020** is a positive step in that direction.
- India should also consider adding to the mix an old idea proposed first by former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Ranil Wickremesinghe — **an overland economic corridor through India** that would provide Sri Lanka a land route to Central Asia and beyond.

**Source: IE**