



Navigating the India- Sri Lanka Fisheries Dispute

This editorial is based on the article "[Resolving the vexatious fishing dispute](#)," which was published in *The Hindu* on 13/03/2025. The article highlights the India-Sri Lanka Palk Bay fisheries dispute and stresses the need for sustainable solutions, government action, and renewed bilateral talks.

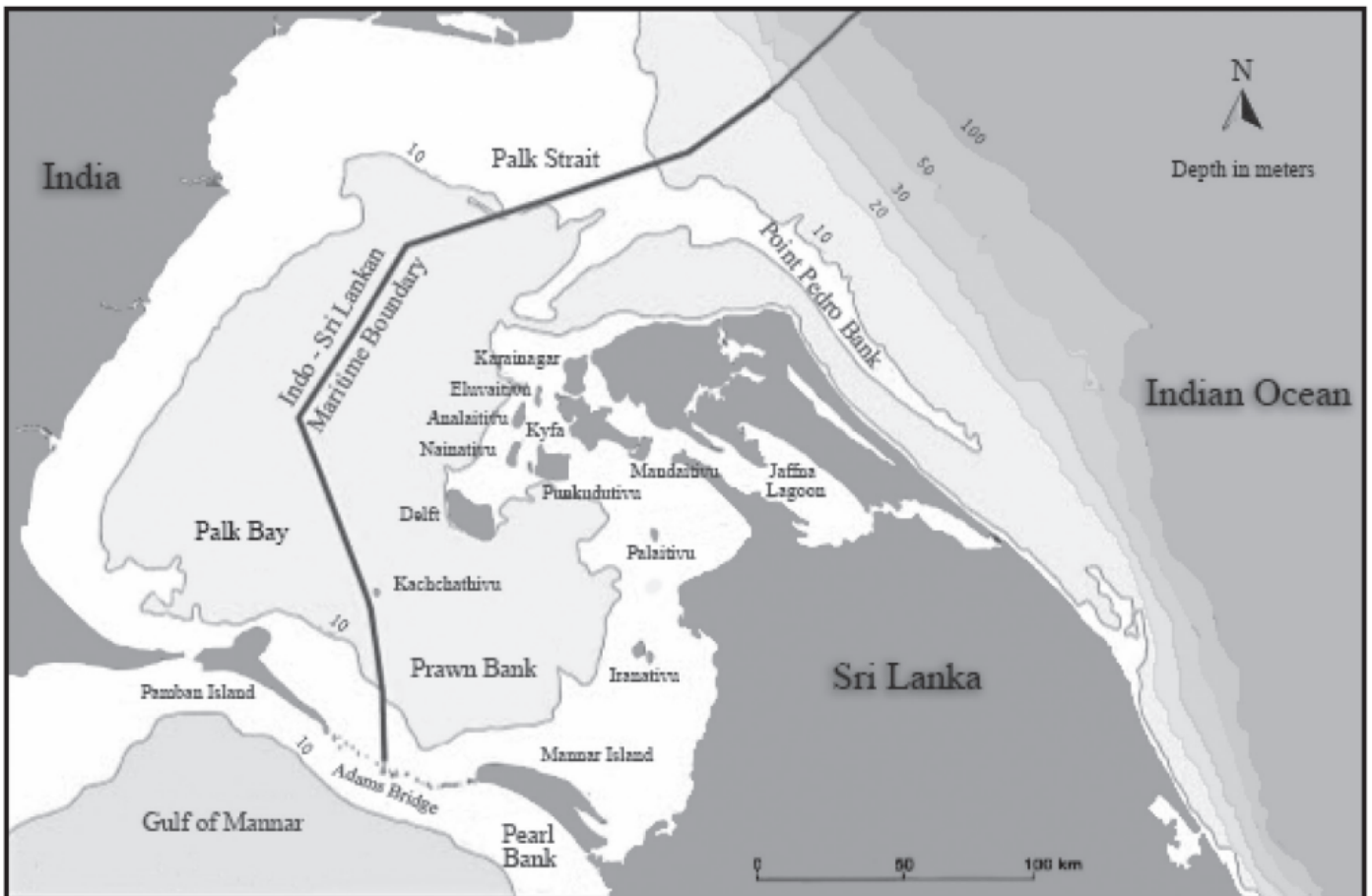
For Prelims: [International Maritime Boundary Line \(IMBL\)](#), [UNCLOS](#), [Katchatheevu](#), [India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement \(ISFTA\)](#), [Mitra Shakti](#), [BIMSTEC \(Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation\)](#), [SAARC](#)

For Mains: Key Issues in the India-Sri Lanka Fishing Dispute, Major Areas of Cooperation Between India and Sri Lanka, International Laws on Freedom of Fishing

The India-Sri Lanka fisheries dispute has been a long-standing issue that continues to strain diplomatic relations between the two neighboring nations. Recently, Sri Lankan Leader of the House, Bimal Rathnayake, called on India to take decisive action against illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters. While acknowledging India's past support, he emphasized the urgent need to safeguard the livelihoods of Tamil-speaking fishermen in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, who are severely affected by this issue.

What are the Key Issues in the India-Sri Lanka Fishing Dispute?

- **Recurrent Arrests:** Indian fishermen with their trawlers often in search of fishes stray into Sri Lankan waters due to engine failures or sudden weather changes.
 - The destruction of fishing vessels, continued boat confiscation after fishermen's release, and heavy fines by Sri Lankan authorities remain recurring issues between both nations.
- **Violation of IMBL:** Indian fishermen claim historical fishing rights beyond the [International Maritime Boundary Line \(IMBL\)](#) based on traditional practices that lead to arrests of Indian fishermen in areas close to the IMBL.
 - The Palk bay is equally divided between India and Sri Lanka by the IMBL, but fishing rights remain contested.
 - The IMBL (as per [UNCLOS](#)) is an official boundary separating territorial waters, defining maritime jurisdiction, and regulating fishing, resource use, and naval activities.



- **Depletion of Fish Stocks:** Overfishing on the Indian side of the IMBL forces Indian fishermen into Sri Lankan waters, which Sri Lanka views as “poaching,” posing security risks and threatening local livelihoods.
- **Bottom-Trawling:** Sri Lanka opposes ecologically destructive **bottom trawling** employed by Indian fishermen, and seeks a sustainable solution to protect their waters from over-exploitation.
 - Bottom trawling drags weighted nets along the seabed, damaging marine habitats like coral reefs and sponges.
- **Sri Lanka’s National Security Concerns:** Sri Lanka alleges that Indian trawlers intrude regularly in a coordinated manner and fears Tamil militant groups may re-emerge using fishing vessels.
- **Katchatheevu Island Dispute:** The **Katchatheevu** issue revolves around the ownership and usage rights of the uninhabited island of Katchatheevu, located in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka.
 - In 1974, an agreement between the Prime Ministers of India and Sri Lanka recognized Katchatheevu as part of Sri Lanka's territory, altering its ownership.
 - Due to differing interpretation of the agreement by both sides, it failed to resolve the fishing rights issue, with Sri Lanka limiting Indian fishermen's access to activities such as resting, drying nets, and visiting the Catholic shrine without visa.



What are the Major Areas of Cooperation Between India and Sri Lanka?

- **Development Cooperation:** India is a significant provider of development aid to Sri Lanka.
 - Notable initiatives include the **Indian Housing Project**, which aims to build 50,000 homes for war-affected communities. Additional support includes electricity projects, railway development, and various community development initiatives.
 - In 2022, India agreed to set up **hybrid power projects** in northern Sri Lanka and initiated development projects at **Kankesanthurai and Trincomalee ports**.
- **Economic Cooperation:** India and Sri Lanka have strengthened economic ties through the **India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA)**, with India being Sri Lanka's third-largest export destination and over 60% of exports benefiting from the agreement.
 - They are also exploring an **Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA)** to further strengthen their economies.
 - Sri Lanka's adoption of India's **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** has improved fintech connections, and using the rupee for trade supports its economy.
- **Cultural Relations:** The 1977 Cultural Cooperation Agreement has enabled cultural exchanges, while the Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo promotes Indian arts and organizes **International Yoga Day**.
 - Additionally, the India-Sri Lanka Foundation, established in 1998, strengthens scientific and cultural collaboration
- **Defence and Security Cooperation:** Since 2012, India has been involved in the Indo-Sri Lankan Defence Dialogue, focusing on security partnerships. Both nations conduct **joint military (Mitra Shakti) and naval (SLINEX)** exercises to enhance their defence collaboration.

- India is providing support through a free-floating dock facility, a Dornier reconnaissance aircraft, and a training team, all aimed at bolstering security in the Indian Ocean region.
- **Multilateral Cooperation:** Both countries actively participate in regional organisations such as [BIMSTEC \(Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation\)](#) and [SAARC](#) as well as international bodies like the United Nations and the [World Trade Organization](#)

What are the Implications of the Indo-Sri Lanka Fishing Conflict?

- **Livelihood Issues:** Sri Lanka Navy's arrests of Indian fishers distress their families, while sea conflicts have caused fatalities and missing fishers, heightening risks for fishing communities.
- **Enforcement Challenges:** The enforcement cost for patrolling the IMBL has risen, straining resources.
- **Smuggling Concerns:** The Indian Coast Guard and Sri Lanka Navy struggle to differentiate between genuine fishers and smugglers making IMBL vulnerable to smuggling.
- **Political Ramifications:** Allegations against the Sri Lanka Navy's actions in the Palk Bay have fueled diplomatic tensions between the two nations.
 - E.g., Political tensions have influenced India's support for UN resolutions on Sri Lanka's human rights record.
- **Environmental Impact:** Bottom trawling harms fish breeding, depletes stocks, and damages the seafloor, with recovery taking thousands of years.
- **Economic Consequences:** Overfishing has reduced fishery resources and fishers' income, with Sri Lanka losing an estimated USD 730 million annually due to Indian poaching.

What are International Laws on Freedom of Fishing?

- **UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA, 1995):** States should either become members, or they should agree to apply the conservation and management measures established by Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) to access fishery resources.
 - RFMOs are international bodies responsible for managing and conserving fish stocks in specific ocean regions.
- **UNCLOS, 1982:** Article 87 of UNCLOS limits fishing freedom on the [high seas](#), making it illegal for vessels from States that fail to meet its conditions.
 - E.g., Considering due regard for the interests of other States in their exercise of the freedom of the high seas.

What should be the Way Forward to Resolve the Fisheries Dispute?

- **Joint Marine Resource Management:** A regional fisheries management authority should be established to regulate fishing activities and prevent overexploitation of marine ecosystems.
 - The **India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group (JWG)** on Fisheries, established at the secretarial level in 2016, should be revitalized to seek a permanent resolution to the fishermen issue.
- **Promoting Deep-Sea Fishing and Alternative Livelihoods**
 - The Indian government must accelerate efforts to transition Tamil Nadu fishermen toward deep-sea fishing.
 - The **Palk Bay deep-sea fishing scheme**, part of the **Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)**, aims to support traditional fishermen in Tamil Nadu, particularly those in the Palk Bay area, by providing deep-sea fishing vessels and promoting activities like **seaweed cultivation** and **sea-ranching** to reduce fishing pressure and cross-border fishing conflicts
- **Enforcing Regulations and Phasing Out Bottom Trawling**

- Strict enforcement of the **Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act, 1983**, is necessary to curb bottom trawling.
- India should gradually phase out this practice by providing incentives and financial assistance for sustainable fishing methods.
- Sri Lanka, in turn, should establish clear guidelines and designated zones for joint fishing activities.
- **Enhancing Regional Cooperation and Technology Sharing**
 - Both countries must collaborate on marine conservation initiatives, scientific research, and technological advancements in sustainable fishing.
 - A model worth considering is the **Australia-Indonesia Joint Patrol Program**, which utilizes technology for real-time monitoring and cross-border cooperation to prevent illegal fishing..
- **Humanitarian Considerations and Legal Frameworks**
 - A framework for the humane treatment of detained fishermen should be established, ensuring timely repatriation and legal support.
 - Both nations could adopt a **dispute resolution mechanism** similar to the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#) framework, which offers structured, neutral arbitration in maritime disputes

Conclusion

Resolving the India-Sri Lanka fisheries dispute is not just a matter of economic or environmental necessity; it is a diplomatic imperative for both countries in the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape. By leveraging their shared maritime interests, both nations can strengthen their bilateral ties, enhance regional stability, and contribute to the broader objectives of peace, security, and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Drishti Mains Question:

Examine the key issues in the India- Sri Lanka fisheries dispute and suggest measures to achieve a sustainable and equitable resolution.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims:

Q. Consider the following statements: (2020)

1. The value of Indo-Sri Lanka trade has consistently increased in the last decade.
2. "Textile and textile articles" constitute an important item of trade between India and Bangladesh.
3. In the last five years, Nepal has been the largest trading partner of India in South Asia.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

Q. Elephant Pass, sometimes seen in the news, is mentioned in the context of the affairs of which one of the following? (2009)

- (a) Bangladesh
- (b) India
- (c) Nepal
- (d) Sri Lanka

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q. 'India is an age-old friend of Sri Lanka.' Discuss India's role in the recent crisis in Sri Lanka in the light of the preceding statement. (2022)

Q. In respect of India-Sri Lanka relations, discuss how domestic factors influence foreign policy. (2013)

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