

India Sri Lanka Relations for UPSC GS-2

India's relations with her neighbours are an important part of the International Relations syllabus of the UPSC exam. In this article, you can read about the relations between India and her southern neighbour Sri Lanka for the IAS mains exam.

Background of India-Sri Lanka relations

India has ancient links with Sri Lanka since the rule of Emperor Ashoka. The relationship between the two countries is more than 2,500 years old and both sides have built upon a legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic intercourse. Relations between the two countries have also matured and diversified with the passage of time, encompassing all areas of contemporary relevance. The shared cultural and social heritage of the two countries and the extensive people to people interaction of their citizens provide the foundation to build a multi-faceted partnership. In recent years, the relationship has been marked by close contacts at the highest political level, growing trade and investment, cooperation in the fields of development, education, culture and defence, as well as a broad understanding on major issues of international interest.

Conflicts in India-Sri Lanka Relations

Despite cordial relations in the past, contemporary relations have been plagued by many incidents that have strained the cordial relations between the two nations. The main factors which have contributed to the strained relations between the two countries are -

The Fishermen issue: Arrest of Indian fishermen on the Sri Lankan side of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) in the Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar by Sri Lankan authorities has been a long-standing problem with the Sri Lankan Navy firing on Indian fishing vessels. The catch on the Sri Lankan side is better both in terms of quality (high-value prawns) and quantity. The issue started because of Indian fishermen having used mechanised trawlers, which deprived the Sri Lankan fishermen (including Tamils) of their catch and damaged their fishing boats. The Sri Lankan government wants India to ban use of mechanized trawlers in the Palk Strait region, and negotiations on this subject are undergoing. So far, no concrete agreement has been reached since India favours regulating these trawlers instead of banning them altogether.

Indian intervention in the Sri-Lankan civil War: In the 1970's-1980's, Sri-Lanka was plunged into a civil war with Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist insurgent force, on one side and the Sri-Lankan Government on the other. It was also believed that certain elements in the Research

and Analysis Wing (R&AW), one of India's many Central and Investigative Agencies, and private politicians were funding these insurgents. In 1987, faced with growing anger amongst its own Tamils, and a flood of refugees, India intervened directly in the conflict for the first time after the Sri Lankan government attempted to regain control of the northern Jaffna region by means of an economic blockade and military assaults, India supplied food and medicine by air and sea . After subsequent negotiations, India and Sri Lanka entered into an agreement. The peace accord assigned a certain degree of regional autonomy in the Tamil areas with Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) controlling the regional council and called for the Tamil militant groups to lay down their arms. Further India was to send a peacekeeping force, named the IPKF to Sri Lanka to enforce the disarmament and to watch over the regional council.

According to experts well-versed in Indian foreign policy, Indian intervention in Sri Lankan civil war was inevitable as that civil war threatened India's "unity, national interest and territorial integrity". This threat came in two ways: On the one hand external powers could take advantage of the situation to establish their base in Sri Lanka thus posing a threat to India, on the other the LTTE's dream of a sovereign Tamil Eelam comprising of all the Tamil inhabited areas, including that of mainland India, posed a threat to India's territorial integrity.

The result was that the LTTE now found itself engaged in military conflict with the Indian Army. The conflict between the LTTE and the Indian Army left over 1,000 Indian soldiers dead.

The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, which had been unpopular amongst Sri Lankans for giving India a major influence, now became a source of nationalist anger and resentment as the IPKF was drawn fully into the conflict. Sri Lankans protested the presence of the IPKF, and the newly elected Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa demanded its withdrawal, which was completed by March 1990. On May 21, 1991, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated and the LTTE was alleged to be the perpetrator. As a result, India declared the LTTE to be a terrorist outfit in 1992. Bilateral relations improved in the 1990s and India supported the peace process but has resisted calls to get involved again.

The conflict officially ended on 19th May 2009, with the President Mahinda Rajapaksa delivering a victory address to the Sri Lankan Parliament stating that "Sri Lanka is liberated from terrorism". The leader of LTTE Velupillai Prabhakaran was eliminated on 18th May 2009. The conflict had left 80,000-100,000 dead on both sides with about 800,000 being internally displaced.

India-Sri Lanka Commercial Relations

Sri Lanka has long been a priority destination for direct investment from India. Sri Lanka is one of India's largest trading partners in SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation). Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the entry into force of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000. According to Sri Lankan Customs, bilateral trade in 2018 amounted to US \$ 4.93 billion.

- Exports from India to Sri Lanka in 2018 were US\$ 4.16billion, while exports from Sri Lanka to India are US\$ 767 million. The main items of exports from Sri Lanka to India are: Base Oil, Poultry feeds, Areca nuts, (waste and scrap) paper or paperboard, Pepper, Ignition Wiring Sets, Copper wire, Marble, travertine and alabaster.
- Main items of Imports from India to Sri Lanka are: Gas oil/ Diesel, Motorcycles, Pharmaceutical Products, Portland cement, Semi finished products of Iron, Military weapon, Fuel oil, Rice, Cement clinkers, Kerosene Type jet Fuel.
- India is one of the largest investors in Sri Lanka with cumulative investments of around USD 1.239 billion. The investments are in diverse areas including petroleum retail, IT, financial services, real estate, telecommunication, hospitality & tourism, banking and food processing (tea & fruit juices), copper and other metal industries), tires, cement, glass manufacturing, and infrastructure development (railway, power, water supply).

Development Cooperation

Sri Lanka is among the major recipients of development assistance from the Government of India. India's overall commitment stands close to US\$ 3 billion, out of which around US\$ 560 million are purely in grants. The Indian Housing Project, with an initial commitment to build 50,000 houses for the war affected as well as the estate workers in the plantation areas, is Government of India (GoI)'s flagship project of developmental assistance to Sri Lanka. With an overall commitment of over Indian rupees (INR) 1372 crore in grants, it is one of the largest projects undertaken by GoI abroad. At the moment, all the committed 46,000 houses in the Northern and Eastern Provinces have been completed.