

Dispelling concerns: On Modi visit and India-Sri Lanka ties

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka (April 4-6), his first after 2019, demonstrated the close ties between the two countries beyond mere optics. The visit came after the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) regime took power, with Anura Kumara Dissanayake winning the presidential poll in September 2024.

Despite initial concerns about potential cold relations due to JVP's historical anti-India posture, Colombo showed serious commitment to improving ties with New Delhi through significant diplomatic gestures and agreements.



by OJAANK IAS



Strengthening Diplomatic Relations



Highest Honour Conferred

Sri Lanka conferred its highest honour for foreign leaders on Prime Minister Modi, signaling strong diplomatic goodwill.



Defence Cooperation

A landmark memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation was signed, described as the first of its kind in bilateral relations.

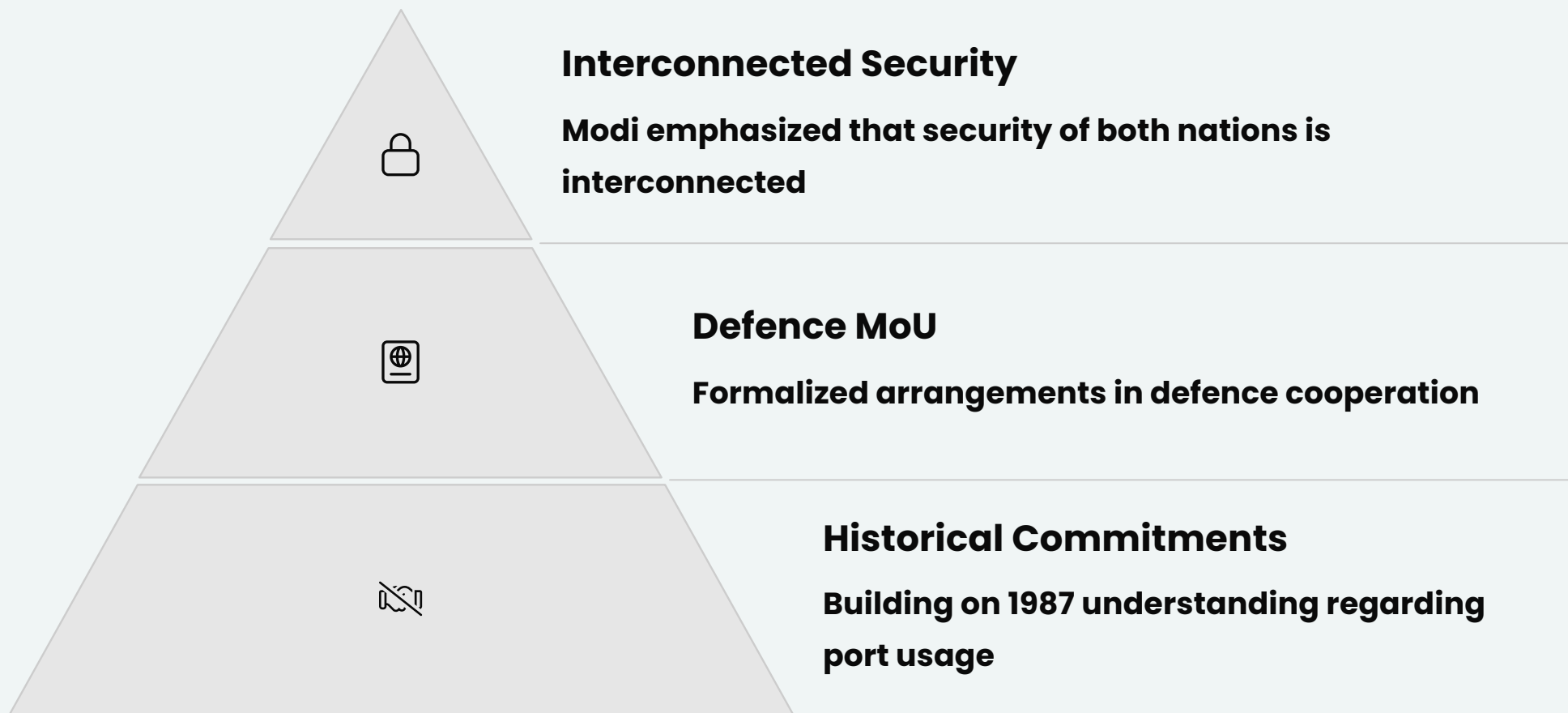


Security Assurances

President Dissanayake reiterated Sri Lanka's commitment not to permit its territory to be used against India's security and regional stability.



Security Concerns and Commitments



Prime Minister Modi captured the rationale behind the defence MoU by stating that "the security of both countries is interconnected and co-dependent." While the agreement formalizes certain arrangements in defence cooperation, it remains for the NPP regime to demonstrate that Sri Lanka truly means business in this area.

Sri Lanka remains conscious that even the 1987 understanding not to let Trincomalee or other Sri Lankan ports be used for military purposes by third countries against India has not fully dispelled India's security concerns.

Addressing the Fishermen's Issue



Detailed Discussions

Modi's visit included comprehensive talks on the vexatious fishermen's issue, crucial for Tamil Nadu.



Community Dialogue

Recent meeting between fishing communities from both sides of the Palk Bay to exchange views.



Future Engagement

Need for follow-up talks overseen by government officials to create lasting solutions.

The fishermen's issue remains of significant importance to Tamil Nadu. It was a positive sign that detailed discussions took place during Modi's visit. For meaningful progress, these initial talks should trigger a full-fledged discussion between the fishing communities of both countries, with government officials overseeing the process.

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Tamil Parties and Political Settlement

Recognition of Indo-Lanka Accord

Tamil parties acknowledged the significance of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord in their pursuit of achieving a political settlement.

Request for Indian Involvement

They sought India's "legitimate involvement" in the process, recognizing India's historical role in facilitating solutions.

Provincial Councils

The Accord paved the way for establishing provincial councils as a measure of devolution, though support for implementation has been inconsistent.

A significant outcome of the visit was that Tamil parties, in their meeting with Prime Minister Modi, conveyed their recognition of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 in pursuit of achieving a political settlement for the Tamils. They specifically sought India's "legitimate involvement" in this process.



India's Role in Sri Lankan Reconciliation

Dispassionate Observer

India should maintain a balanced approach to Sri Lankan internal politics

Facilitate Dialogue

Support constructive conversations between different communities



Economic Support

Provide liberal economic aid for war-torn Northern and Eastern provinces

Democratic Process

Encourage stakeholders to pursue democratic means for consensus

There has been criticism even within Sri Lanka that many parties had not fully supported the Accord, which established provincial councils as a devolution measure. New Delhi can play a constructive role by providing economic aid for the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces while maintaining its position as a dispassionate observer.

Historical Context of JVP and India Relations



Historical Anti-India Stance

JVP historically maintained an anti-India posture, creating concerns about potential cold relations after their rise to power.



Electoral Victory

NPP's resounding parliamentary election victory two months after Dissanayake's presidential win consolidated their political position.



Policy Shift

Current JVP leadership has demonstrated a pragmatic approach to international relations, particularly with India.



New Chapter

Modi's visit marks a significant milestone in overcoming historical tensions and building a forward-looking relationship.



Future of India–Sri Lanka Relations

Implementing Defence Cooperation

Translating the newly signed MoU into concrete actions that address mutual security concerns while respecting sovereignty.

Resolving Fishermen's Disputes

Adopting a flexible approach through continued community-level dialogue to create lasting solutions for fishing communities on both sides.

Supporting Tamil Political Settlement

India providing economic support while encouraging democratic consensus-building among all stakeholders for a sustainable political solution.

The path forward for India–Sri Lanka relations looks promising despite historical concerns. With the formal defence cooperation agreement, ongoing dialogue on the fishermen's issue, and India's balanced approach to internal political settlements, both nations have an opportunity to build stronger ties based on mutual respect and shared interests.

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