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**Ties with Sri Lanka**

In the backdrop of persistent efforts by India to isolate Pakistan in the region and beyond, the two-day visit to Sri Lanka by Prime Minister Imran Khan in the last week of February was of great significance.

The visit has surely produced positive outcomes with regard to further strengthening the historically cordial ties between the two countries which have agreed to enhance bilateral relations in diverse areas, including defence, trade and tourism through greater connectivity. PM Imran Khan also offered a $50 million line of credit to Sri Lanka for defence purchases.

The visit was also aimed at building a strategic relationship with Sri Lanka, as Prime Minister Imran Khan invited the Sri Lankan leadership to join CPEC for regional connectivity. The move was part of a well-conceived and proactive strategy to engage South Asian countries in view of the worsening ties with India. Sri Lanka is an important member of Saarc and the South Asian region. Taking relations with Sri Lanka to a higher level would surely scuttle Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan in the region.

India has strained relations with the government of Sri Lanka, particularly with the present leadership of the country, for the support India had extended to the Tamil Tigers during the insurgency. India along with the US also played a role in the defeat of Rajapaksa in the 2015 elections to install a pro-India and Pro-US government there. Rajapaksa served as president of Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2015, during which he was able to end the three decades old insurgency in the country and establish peace.

It was during the regime of Rajapaksa that relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka became very strong. Sri Lanka started buying arms and ammunition from Pakistan in a big way from 1999 to quell insurgency in the country. The total purchases until December 2007 were worth $50 million while there was a sudden jump in the quantity of merchandise ordered in 2009. Much opinion in Sri Lanka in fact favoured and promoted the idea of the Sri Lankan government finalizing a defence cooperation agreement with Islamabad.

In May 2000, Pakistan supplied millions of dollars of much-needed weapons to the Sri Lankan government, when Tamil Tiger rebels were about to recapture their former capital of Jaffna.

In April 2009, Sri Lanka requested $25 million worth of 81 mm, 120 mm and 130 mm mortar ammunition to be delivered within a month. Sri Lanka also evinced interest in the purchase of Pakistani al-Khalid Main Battle Tanks, light weapons and ammunition, and the Sino-Pak joint venture product JF-17 Thunder aircraft. Till the recent past, the relationship between the two countries predominantly focused on defence cooperation because of Sri Lanka’s war against the Tamil Tigers.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Pakistan in February 2012 which gave a new dimension to bilateral relations between the two countries. They agreed to enhance bilateral trade from $375 million to $2 billion within three years, besides expanding cooperation in the field of economy, defence, media and technical education. Pakistan and Sri Lanka agreed to strengthen multi-sectoral cooperation and consequently, one MOU and three agreements were signed during the visit to formalize the cooperation in different fields.

One agreement pertained to waiving off visas for officials and diplomats to facilitate an increased level of interaction between the two countries. Under the second agreement on customs, both the countries agreed to cooperate with each other in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, transfer of illicit substances and illicit trafficking in narcotics.

The third agreement for cultural cooperation expressed commitment in the fields of arts, culture, creative studies, archaeology, sports, education, information and media; to achieve this objective, it was agreed to enhance exchange of cultural delegations, besides the holding of exhibitions for promoting and highlighting cultural heritage of both the countries. The MOU on agriculture focused on cooperation for mutual benefits. Pakistan also offered Sri Lanka a $200 million buyer’s credit loan, giving it the option to make the payment either on barter or in local currency that was much appreciated by the Sri Lankan government.

The two countries also decided to reinvigorate the Joint Economic Commission, and task it to work out modalities for a new and unconventional phase of economic cooperation marked by barter trade, currency exchanges and banking interchanges. Sri Lanka was the first country that signed a free trade agreement with Pakistan, which became effective in June 2005 under which 4,000 items could be imported.

The process of the expansion and diversification of bilateral relations between the two countries set rolling during Rajapaksa’s regime has continued to be on the higher trajectory. The relationship is characterized by the realization between the two sides that their cultural heritage provides a sound basis for building a multifaceted partnership to their mutual advantage. Their shared values and concerns about regional security justify an increased synergy of their economies and reinforcing of the institutional framework for cooperation.

More so, Sri Lanka, like Pakistan, rejects India’s hegemony in the region. The commonality of views on this issue is yet another strong pillar of the Pak-Sri Lanka relationship. Further, Sri Lanka has always stood by Pakistan like a true friend. For instance, when all the cricket playing nations of the world showed reluctance to send their teams to Pakistan on the pretext of terrorism, it was the Sri Lankan administration that showed solidarity with us and sent its team to Lahore. It was, however, most unfortunate that the terrorists were able to make things worse by attacking it. Pakistan’s government and people appreciate that gesture and hold the Sri Lankans in the highest esteem.

The return of Rajapaksa and his party to power in Sri Lanka augurs well for bilateral relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as with respect to the development of strategic relations for regional connectivity and stability.

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