

A TIME TO REBUILD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Sri Lanka

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At the end of his talks with the visiting Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) affirmed that “the security and development of our two countries are inseparable. Therefore, it is natural that we should be aware of each other’s safety and sensibilities.” This proposition appears self-evident. Yet the reality of recent decades has been the intense discord between Delhi and Colombo, triggered by India’s involvement in the prolonged civil war in Sri Lanka. India’s support for Tamil insurgent groups in the early 1980s followed by a military intervention during 1987-90 and political pressure on the rights of the Tamil minority had convinced the Sinhala majority that Delhi was hostile to the island nation. India had grievances of its own — due to Colombo’s steady strategic drift towards Beijing and its lack of progress on political reconciliation with the Tamil population after a decisive victory against the insurgency a decade ago.

Efforts in the last few years to resolve these contentions went nowhere, thanks to internecine battles in Colombo between the president and prime minister. The decisive mandate for Gotabaya in the recent elections has opened up space for a renewed effort at rebuilding bilateral relations. In Delhi, Gotabaya affirmed that Sri Lanka will do nothing to undermine India’s security interests and promised that his government’s engagement with China will be strictly commercial. India, in turn, has extended strong support to Gotabaya’s plans to counter the resurgence of terrorism in Lanka and to the new president’s ambitious economic goals.

But the Tamil question remains a ticking time bomb that could once again wreck bilateral relations. Modi said Gotabaya briefed him on his plans to address the concerns of the Tamil minority and expressed hope that the Lanka president will meet their aspirations. Gotabaya argues that talk of devolution has delivered little to the Tamils, but only angered the Sinhala majority. He says he would like to transcend Lanka’s identity politics by producing meaningful change in the economic conditions of the Tamil population. For many in Chennai, this approach will be unacceptable. But Delhi surely knows that it cannot impose external solutions to Sri Lankan problems. Colombo knows that doing nothing for the Tamils will inevitably escalate Chennai’s pressure on Delhi to intervene in Lanka’s internal politics and push the two nations back to square one. There is only one way to manage this complex political interdependence — for Colombo to make visible progress on the Tamil condition and for Delhi to support indigenous solutions for Sri Lanka’s political reconciliation.

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