

WINNING THE PEACE: ON GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA'S INDIA VISIT

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The visit last week of [Sri Lanka's new President Gotabaya Rajapaksa](#) to India and his [extended talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) was an affirmation by the two nations to make good bilateral ties a priority for each. Mr. Rajapaksa is aware of the problems the relationship has faced, due to both the proximity between India and Sri Lanka, and the interlinked and complicated peoples' histories. In comments to *The Hindu*, he made it clear that he wants consistency and constant communication to avoid the problems of the past. In the last decade, these have included India's concerns about the pace of reconciliation in the Tamil-majority North and East, the welcoming of Chinese investment for major projects including the Hambantota port and Colombo harbour and military engagement, unhappiness over the slow pace of clearance for Indian projects, and other bilateral issues. In Colombo there has been the overhanging suspicion that Indian intelligence agencies play a role in domestic politics, including the 2015 defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the hour-long conversation the two leaders had, it seemed apparent that there was some clarity on all issues and a will to build a new future. There was also a recognition that after working together closely against the LTTE, there were new threats, especially in the wake of the Easter Day bombings by an Islamic State-affiliated group that has Indian links. India's announcement of \$50-million in aid along with an additional \$400-million in development aid is proof of that. India's and Sri Lanka's security is "indivisible" Mr. Modi said, indicating the need for more high-level contacts. Mr. Rajapaksa accepted Mr. Modi's invitation to make his first presidential visit abroad to New Delhi, and has invited the Indian leader to be the first State guest he welcomes to Colombo.

However, the next few months will reveal how much the new regime will actually work to engage New Delhi's concerns. Apart from clearances for infrastructure projects in the north, port projects in Trincomalee, and the airport in Mattala, Mr. Rajapaksa will be judged on how far he regulates investment and manage debts to China. Above all, his attitude towards the less developed areas of the North and East, where most minorities did not vote for him, will be keenly watched. His stated desire to place development over devolution commitments will be a cause for worry for New Delhi as well as Chennai, that have consistently urged the Sri Lankan government to ensure what the MEA called "dignity, peace, equality and justice" for Tamils; they suffered devastating losses during the three decades of war and remain less prosperous than the rest of the Island country. While a war can be won in a defined and short span, winning the peace and healing people is an extended process that takes decades, a process that India will follow closely in Sri Lanka.

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