

FIRST CALL: ON INDIA-SRI LANKA TIES

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By making New Delhi their first stop abroad, Sri Lanka's new President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who visited in November, and Prime Minister [Mahinda Rajapaksa, after a five-day tour](#), have signalled hope of beginning a new India-Sri Lanka chapter. Contrary to their last stint which ended in 2015, when Mahinda Rajapaksa was President, and his younger brother Gotabaya was Defence Secretary, and ties underwent a strain for several reasons, New Delhi too has indicated that it would like to make a fresh start, working on development projects, including a joint India-Japan proposal for the East Container Terminal at Colombo. Mahinda Rajapaksa has also discussed extending the \$400-million Line of Credit and India's further assistance for nationwide housing. Air connectivity to Sri Lanka's north and east is already being improved — there is a flight from India to Jaffna, and another one being proposed for Batticaloa. On security, Mr. Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed intelligence sharing, training and the utilisation of a special \$50-million Line of Credit extended by India after last year's Easter Sunday bombings. India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are expected to revive their trilateral on security, including joint maritime security talks and anti-terror cooperation. Finally, Mr. Rajapaksa reaffirmed his belief that among Sri Lanka's friendships, India is seen as a "relative", given their history and culture.

The bonhomie is palpable, but the faultlines were also visible. [Prime Minister Modi said India hopes that the "expectations of the Tamil](#) people for equality, justice, peace, and respect" would be realised and that devolution of powers according to the 13th amendment would be taken forward. Mr. Rajapaksa has given no commitment on this and said, in an interview to *The Hindu*, that he favoured the 13A but not solutions that were "unacceptable to the majority [Sinhala] community". India's case for the special status for the North and East also comes across as contrary to the Modi government's strong stand about removal of the special status for Jammu and Kashmir. Mr. Rajapaksa has ruled out taking forward the MoU signed by his predecessor Ranil Wickremesinghe allowing Indian participation in energy and infrastructure projects in Trincomalee; an Indian stake in "Mattala airport" is not on the cards either. However, of note is his appeal for India to help Sri Lanka deal with its debt crisis — nearly \$60-billion outstanding in foreign and domestic, and about \$5-billion a year in repayments. New Delhi must consider his request for a three-year moratorium and be upfront about its response, in contrast to the past when New Delhi did not take up an offer to develop Hambantota port, and ceded space to China. Ignoring or rebuffing the new request could damage bilateral ties far more.

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