

INDIA MUST FOCUS ON REBUILDING TRUST WITH LANKA

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India should help heal the divided island of Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's short visit to the island was designed to show solidarity with Sri Lanka after its recent terrorism trauma. But he also sought to urge Sri Lankans, a country unusually crisscrossed by faultlines given its small size, to avoid the path that led them earlier to civil war. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Sirisena took some of this to heart when he announced his country needed to avoid creating a "Muslim Prabhakaran" — a reference to the late Tamil separatist leader. Such statements have been rare since the Islamic State-inspired attacks, in part because some Sri Lankan politicians supported reprisals against the Muslim minority.

New Delhi must walk a tightrope when it tries to influence Sri Lanka. India's blundering interventions and Sinhalese unwillingness to admit its own mistakes in the civil war has meant there is much resentment of New Delhi. This residual suspicion has geopolitical repercussions. It encouraged the last Sri Lankan regime to embrace Beijing so tightly that the island economy is now the textbook example of a Chinese debt trap. The lack of trust seems to have also been one reason the Sri Lankan leadership ignored Indian intelligence warnings about the terror attacks.

Rebuilding a degree of trust at the highest levels is important for India. But this will not happen overnight. In its own strange way, the terror attacks have given India an opportunity to repair some of the past damage. Modi took pains to meet all the heads of the three warring Sri Lankan political parties: President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the opposition leader Mahendra Rajapaksa. He also met the chief ministers of all the provinces and the Tamil minority parties. The Indo-Japanese contract to build a new port terminal in Colombo was also finalised, helping remind Sri Lankans of the economic benefits of a rising India. There was a time when New Delhi thought it could be first friend of all interest groups in Sri Lanka. India should continue to strive for that goal but accept it will be a long and winding path.

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