



INDIA IS UNCOMFORTABLE WITH IMRAN KHAN'S VISIT TO SRI LANKA

By

Dost Muhammad Barrech, *Research Associate*

&

Muhammad Iqbal, *Intern*
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by

Dr Saif ur Rehman Malik

March 29, 2021

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan undertook a two-day official visit to Sri Lanka, on the invitation of his Sri Lankan counterpart, Mahinda Rajapaksa, on 23-24 February, 2021. It was the first visit of any head of state since the formation of a new government in Sri Lanka. In meetings held with Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, views were exchanged on matters of bilateral and regional importance. PM Khan also met with Sri Lankan president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and tweeted that “We exchanged views on how to give farmers more for their produce and get cheaper food & fruits to the population by using technology to eliminate middlemen. We also discussed other dimensions of our extensive ties to strengthen political and trade ties for our mutual benefit.”¹

Khan’s visit to Sri Lanka is considered as a part of Islamabad’s proactive diplomatic efforts to engage South Asian countries amid the worsening of their ties with its arch-rival India over Kashmir issue. Rafiuzzaman Siddiqui, a former Pakistani diplomat, observes that official visit of Khan has its own importance, it takes place at a time when relations between Sri Lanka and New India are strained,

¹ News Desk, “PM Imran Khan Meets Sri Lankan Cricket Greats During Official Visit.” *The News International*, February 24, 2021 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/795057-pm-imran-khan-meets-sri-lankan-cricket-greats> .

and most notably, New Delhi is seeking to isolate Pakistan in international arena.² During the visit a number of memorandums of understanding (MoUs) were signed to enhance bilateral cooperation on tourism, the Boards of Investment and cooperation in the field of education. The two leaders also focused on strengthening ties in the areas of trade and investment, health, agriculture, science and technology, security and culture through enhancing connectivity.³

Khan also offered Sri Lanka to join the multi-billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that will connect Sri Lanka with the Central Asia.⁴ "Through the CPEC [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor], economic ties can be extended to Central Asia and Sri Lanka," he said⁵. Relations are likely to turn into strategic partnership between the two states, if Colombo accepts Islamabad's offer to join CPEC. PM of Pakistan, meanwhile, participated in a joint 'Trade and Investment Conference' aimed at promoting trade and investment between the two countries. Both sides endorsed the importance of the goal of achieving \$1 billion bilateral trade target.⁶

Khan also announced 100 scholarships in the medical field for Sri Lankan students and allocation of Rs.52 million for the construction of sports infrastructure in the country.⁷ Rajapaksa thanked PM Imran for Pakistan's cooperation in the field of education and sports. PM Imran Khan highlighted the need for resolution of outstanding issues, particularly Kashmir matter, peacefully in accordance with the United Nations' resolutions.⁸

Intriguingly, Sri Lankan government demonstrated a gesture of goodwill by ruling out presidential decree to cremate Muslims' dead bodies of victims of Covid-19, as it was against religious belief of

² Aamir Latif, "Imran Khan's Sri Lanka Visit May Foster Strategic Partnership." *Anadolu Agency*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/imran-khan-s-sri-lanka-visit-may-foster-strategic-partnership/2157020>.

³ "Pakistan, Sri Lanka Sign MoUs in Various Sectors," *RADIO PAKISTAN*, March 11, 2021, <https://radio.gov.pk/24-02-2021/pakistan-sri-lanka-sign-mous-in-various-sectors>.

⁴ Srinivasan, Meera, "Imran Khan Pitches Economic Corridor to Sri Lanka." *The Hindu*, February 23, 2021, https://www.google.com/search?q=Srinivasan%2C+Meera%2C+%E2%80%9CImran+Khan+Pitches+Economic+Corridor+to+Sri+Lanka.%E2%80%9DThe+Hindu%2C&rlz=1C1SQL_enPK921PK921&oq=Srinivasan%2C+Meera%2C+%E2%80%9CImran+Khan+Pitches+Economic+Corridor+to+Sri+Lanka.%E2%80%9DThe+Hindu%2C&aqs=chrome..69i57.1041j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

⁵ "PM Imran says CPEC can help extend economic ties to Sri Lanka" *The News International: Latest News Breaking*, Pakistan News. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/794505-pm-imran-khan-embarks-on-two-day-official-visit-to-sri-lanka>, February 23, 2021

⁶ APP. "Pakistan Offers \$50m Credit Line to Sri Lanka for Defence Ties." *DAWN.COM*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1609232>.

⁷ "Sri Lanka Honours PM Imran Khan with Special Documentary." *The News International*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/795099-sri-lanka-honours-pm-imran-khan-with-special-documentary>.

⁸ Ibid.

Muslim community living in Sri Lanka.⁹ Prime Minister of Pakistan thanked his counterpart and tweeted that "I thank the Sri Lankan leadership and welcome their decision to allow the burial option for those dying of Covid-19".¹⁰ The two sides urged to strengthen cooperation in matters related to defences, security, terrorism, organized crime and drugs trafficking.¹¹

In the meantime, India has been uneasy with Khan's visit to Sri Lanka. Bolstering economic ties of Islamabad with Colombo create consternations for New Delhi. Modi's government conceives Islamabad might surpass New Delhi as far as trade with Colombo is concerned as Sri Lanka after India remains the second largest trade partner of Pakistan in South Asia.¹² In Sri Lanka-Pakistan bilateral relationship defence ties have considerable significance. India in 1990 left Sri Lanka in hot water pulled back Indian Peace Keeping Force IPKF by not providing defence support to Sri Lanka. Colombo, resultantly, tilted towards Islamabad to get ammunitions and training for its fighter pilots.¹³ Credit line of US\$50 million (\$63.6 million) offered by Pakistan to Sri Lanka for defence and security is another area that puts India in uneasiness.¹⁴ However, India in Sri Lanka witnessed another big blow, when the Colombo Port development was cancelled. The development of Colombo Port was determined in the First tripartite agreement signed between Sri Lanka India and Japan. Concealment of Colombo port heralded the path to China's influence that by and large proves to be fruitful for Pakistan's interest in the island.¹⁵

India is discontent with defence ties of Sri Lanka with Pakistan and China. New Delhi in 2016 pressurized Colombo not to buy JF-17 Thunder aircraft made in Kamra Aeronautical Complex of Pakistan by the Chinese Chengdu Aircraft Corporation. Participation of Sri Lanka in Pakistan's multi-nation naval exercise, Aman-2021 further intensifies India's worries in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Meanwhile, India had been alleged in supporting Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka, while Pakistan

⁹ "Sri Lanka Ends Forced Cremations of Covid-19 Victims After Imran Khan's Visit." *Hindustan Times*, February 26, 2021.

¹⁰ "Sri Lanka finally lift ban on burial of COVID victims." *Aljazeera*, 26 February, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/sri-lanka-finally-lifts-ban-on-burial-of-covid-victims#:~:text=The%20Sri%20Lankan%20government%20has,Muslim%20groups%20and%20international%20pressure.>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nirupama Subramanian, "Imran Khan in Sri Lanka: Multiple Facets of a Relationship India is Watching," *The Indian Express*, February 25, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/imran-in-sri-lanka-multiple-facets-of-a-relationship-india-is-watching-7201835/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tridivesh Singh Maini, FDI Visiting Fellow "Imran Khan's Visit to Sri Lanka Has Broader Implications," *Future Directions International*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/imran-khans-visit-to-sri-lanka-has-broader-implications/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nirupama Subramanian, "Explained: Here's Why India is Wary of the Sri Lanka-Pakistan Tango," *The Indian Express*, March 4, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-pakistan-sri-lanka-ties-7206715/>.

supported Colombo to crush insurgency ensued in winning hearts and minds of the Sri Lankans. In this regard, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan Riaz Khokhar told Arab News "Pakistan and Sri Lanka have very historic and good relations. We played a very pivotal role in their victory against Tamil insurgency. Now we should not put our friends in trouble by indulging in any other issue than bilateral relations,"¹⁷

New Delhi needs to get into introspection and should ponder over the fact that Islamabad has shifted its foreign policy from geo-strategic to geo-economic. Islamabad believes in regional connectivity, thus, also offered Uzbekistan an access to its seaports of Gwadar and Karachi. It is high time Modi shunned his obsession with hegemonic aspirations based on domination of the region, resulting in isolation and exacerbation of its relations with neighbouring states. New Delhi ought not to be sceptical of PM Pakistan visit to Sri Lanka and should bring home an inclusive approach of Khan guaranteeing resolving outstanding issues through dialogue, regional connectivity and development of the region.

¹⁷ Umair Jamal, "Imran Khan's Sri Lanka Visit: Progress Amid Constraints," *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/imran-khans-sri-lanka-visit-progress-amid-constraints/>.