Sri Lanka-Pakistan Ties - PM Imran Khan's Visit

What is the issue?

- Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan recently made a visit to Sri Lanka.
- In this context, here is a look at the outcomes of the visit and the implications for India.

How has Pak-Sri Lanka ties been?

- **Trade** - Pakistan is Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner in South Asia after India.
- Sri Lanka and Pakistan have a free trade agreement dating back to 2005.
    - Pakistan's top exports to Sri Lanka are textiles and cement.
    - Sri Lanka's top exports to Pakistan are tea, rubber, and readymade garments.
- There were commerce secretary-level talks ahead of Prime Minister Khan's recent visit.
- As part of it, the two countries decided to reactivate a Joint Working Group to resolve pending technical issues on trade.
- **Culture** - Over the last decade, Pakistan has tried to work on a cultural connect with Sri Lanka.
- On this note, it had highlighted its ancient Buddhist connections and sites.
- **Defence** - Defence ties are a strong pillar of the Sri Lanka-Pakistan bilateral relationship.
- After pulling back the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) in 1990, India provided no active defence support to the Sri Lankan military.
    - There was however intelligence sharing during the war against the LTTE.
- On the other hand, Sri Lanka turned to Pakistan for arms and ammunition in the last stages of the war.
- It also sought training for its fighter pilots.
- President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was defence secretary at the time, visited Pakistan in 2008.
- He requested for emergency assistance with military supplies.
- Sri Lankan military officers go to Pakistani military academies for training.
- Recently, Sri Lanka also participated in Pakistan's multi-nation naval exercise, Aman-21.

What are the key outcomes of the recent visit?

- Khan's visit yielded a clutch of MoUs and agreements between the two sides.
- The headline outcome was a $50 million credit line in the defence and security sector.
- Pakistan will set up a centre for the study of Asian cultures and civilisation at Peradeniya University in Kandy.
- A sports institute in Colombo was named after Imran Khan, highlighting the cricket connection between the two countries.

What makes the visit significant?

- **India** - The visit signalled that despite India's best efforts at "isolating" Pakistan, Islamabad has friends in the neighbourhood.
- **UNHRC** - For Colombo, the visit held much value, given its challenging times on the international stage.
- At the recent session of the UNHRC, Sri Lanka faced another resolution on human rights violations and war crimes.
- The resolution is against Sri Lanka for withdrawing from resolution 30/1 of September 2015.
- Under the 2015 resolution, it committed to carry out war crimes investigations.
- **Muslims** - The Islamic world is dissatisfied with Sri Lanka's tight rules for disposal of bodies of Muslims who have died of Covid-19.
    - Burials are not allowed; all bodies must be cremated.
- The rule created a storm in Sri Lanka.
- Community leaders feel that the rules were in keeping with the perceived persecution of Muslims by the state.
- Muslims make up about 11% of Sri Lanka's population.
- They have had tense relations with the Sinhala Buddhist majority for much of the last decade.
- Tensions spiked especially after the Easter 2019 suicide bombings by a group claimed to be members of ISIS.
- Given these, the visit by a head of government of an Islamic country is good for Sri Lanka.

What happened with Khan's address to the Parliament?

- Khan's planned address to the Sri Lankan Parliament was cancelled.
- This was probably because of the concern that he would raise the Kashmir issue.
- And Colombo did not want to anger New Delhi in this.
- Notably, India is already concerned about -

    - Sri Lanka's abrupt withdrawal from a tripartite agreement (along with Japan) for the development of the East Container Terminal at Colombo port
    - the award of a contract to a Chinese company to set up a hybrid renewable energy in an island off Jaffna

What does the visit mean to India-Sri Lanka ties?

- Over the years, Sri Lanka has learnt to balance its ties with India and Pakistan.
- Khan's invitation to Sri Lanka to take advantage of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to enhance trade ties did not elicit any reaction from Sri Lanka.
- Delhi's overflight permission to Khan's plane to Colombo was seen as a sign of the new military thaw at the LoC.
- But it is possible that permission would have been given even without the imminent India-Pakistan agreement on the ceasefire.
- Periodically, the Indian security establishment has voiced concerns about Pakistan's role in the radicalisation of Muslims, especially in Eastern Sri Lanka.
- Funds have allegedly poured in here from some West Asian countries for new mosques.
- Despite all these, India has not perceived Pakistan as a serious rival in Colombo so far.
- Now, there is some caution about a convergence of interests between Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region and in defence co-operation.

Source: The Indian Express

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering