Ties with Sri Lanka - India and China

What is the issue?

- The magnificent Lotus Tower in Colombo, considered to be the latest symbol of Sri Lanka-China ties, was opened to the public recently.
- In this backdrop, here is a comparison of China and India on developing ties with Sri Lanka in the Sirisena years.

What is the Lotus tower?

- An agreement to build the Lotus Tower was signed by China and Sri Lanka in 2012.
- It was to serve as a multi-functional telecommunication tower.

What are the recent developments in China-Sri Lanka ties?

- Maithripala Sirisena had showed a strong anti-China mood since coming into power.
- Nevertheless, Colombo-Beijing ties have stood the test of time.
- China has been able to resolve all the controversies over the projects such as Colombo Port City and Hambantota port.
- The Port City's execution is underway without any major hitch.
- When it is completed, it will stand beside the Colombo port, which serves as a major transhipment hub for India.
- A Chinese company has got Hambantota on lease for 99 years along with associated land of 15,000 acres.
- More importantly, Sri Lanka is a member-country of the Belt and Road Initiative of China.

- Some raise concerns that economic ties with China are driving Sri Lanka into a "debt trap."
- But, despite this, the bilateral relationship among the two countries on the economic front is only becoming stronger.
- According to the 2018 annual report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, imports from China accounted for 18.5%, just a little less than the 19% from India.

How has India's contribution to Sri Lanka been?

- Unlike China, India has not accomplished much in Sri Lanka in the Sirisena years despite the “neighbourhood first” policy since 2014.
- India has made a joint venture deal recently with Japan and Sri Lanka to develop the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port.
- Besides this, India has not taken up any major infrastructure project in Sri Lanka.
- Not much is known about the status of a project to renovate the Kankesanthurai harbour in the Northern Province.
- [India has provided over $45 million in early 2018 for this project.]
- There is also little progress in India’s proposals to develop the Palaly airport in the North.
- Also, the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, an improved version of the existing bilateral Free Trade Agreement, has been shelved.
- In recent years, only a couple of social sector projects of the Indian government gathered momentum.
- These include building 60,000 homes for Tamils of the civil war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces as well as those in the hill country region.
- India has also contributed for the provision of ambulance services all over the island.
- Recently, an agreement was signed to upgrade a key railway segment, connecting the north and the south, at $91 million.
- However, given its potential and willingness to do more in development cooperation, India’s track record has much to be desired.

What strained the India-Sri Lanka ties?

- China-funded infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka may look great, but India-Sri Lanka ties are deeper and more complex.
- Despite the deep ties, India and Sri Lanka have seen some unpleasantness in bilateral relations in contemporary times.
- The anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 dragged India into the Sri Lankan Tamil question.
- The Indian Peace Keeping Force was withdrawn in March 1990.
- India’s former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in May 1991.
- These events distanced India from Sri Lanka till the final phase of the civil war.
- In the last 5 months of the war (ended in May 2009), India repeatedly conveyed to Sri Lanka that the rights and welfare of the civilian population should not get disturbed with hostilities against the LTTE.

What does Sri Lanka need now?

- The Rajiv Gandhi-Jayawardene Accord of 1987 and the 13th Amendment to

the Sri Lankan Constitution was finalized.
- The Amendment envisaged devolution of powers for provinces.
- With all their shortcomings, these two still provided a solid framework to address the ethnic question.
- But apart from a political settlement, the Northern and Eastern provinces, which account for less than 10% of Sri Lanka's GDP, require economic development.

What lies ahead for India?

- With Sri Lanka getting a new President soon, India must coordinate with the new leadership.
- India's priority should be to not just get expeditious approvals for pending infrastructure projects but also contribute to a holistic development of Sri Lanka's youth.
- Also, India should sustain its interest on developmental issues concerning the hill country Tamils, regarded as the most backward in Sri Lanka.

Source: The Hindu

