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## Sri Lanka wants ‘cooperation & progress’ in SAARC, India’s focus still on BIMSTEC

Sri Lanka is keen to move ahead in the SAARC process as it wants greater connectivity with other countries and seamless trading between the member-countries.

**NAYANIMA BASU** 10 February, 2020 9:13 pm IST



Sri Lankan PM Mahinda Rajapaksa with Narendra Modi at Hyderabad House | Photo: Praveen Jain | ThePrint

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**New Delhi:** The issue of progress in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) — which now lies in limbo due to tensions between India and Pakistan — loomed large during the visit of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to New Delhi last week.

Top-level diplomatic sources told ThePrint that Colombo has told New Delhi that “cooperation and progress in SAARC” is of utmost importance for Sri Lanka’s development while it also understands India’s priority in moving ahead with Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (**BIMSTEC**).

According to the sources, Sri Lanka is now keen to move ahead in the SAARC process as it wants greater connectivity with other countries and seamless trading between the member-countries. But without India's cooperation, the process cannot move.

The Sri Lankans, according to the sources, have also told India to at least restart the process of discussion on SAARC as one of its top diplomats — Esala Weerakoon — has been appointed to become the next Secretary-General of the SAARC Secretariat.

Weerakoon will be taking charge from 1 March. He will be succeeding Pakistani diplomat Amjad Hussain B. Sial, who is heading the secretariat since 2017.

ThePrint reached the Ministry of External Affairs, but it refused to comment.

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### **What Modi said after his meeting with Rajapaksa**

During his press statement after the bilateral meeting with Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Modi sought “close cooperation” with Sri Lanka on the Indo-Pacific region.

“Stability, security and prosperity in Sri Lanka are not only in interest of India, but also in the interest of the entire Indian Ocean region and, therefore, our close cooperation is valuable for peace and prosperity even in the Indo-Pacific region,” Modi [had said](#) on Saturday.

However, Rajapaksa carefully avoided mentioning Indo-Pacific, which is largely seen as an initiative to counter China, during his remarks to the media.

On the issue of SAARC over BIMSTEC, New Delhi has made it clear that it is more keen to move ahead on BIMSTEC for not just its larger outreach to the Southeast Asian countries, but also for its ‘Look East’ policy and the role it intends to play in the Indo-Pacific initiative.

It has been India's position that it will not be able to move on SAARC unless Pakistan stops cross-border terrorism. As a result, the focus of the Modi government has shifted to BIMSTEC and Indo-Pacific.

However, Colombo has also cautioned New Delhi that lack of progress in SAARC is giving an impetus to Beijing to further push itself into the subcontinent as a major development partner, sources added.

### **Sri Lanka trying to reboot ties with India**

Ever since the Rajapaksa government came to power in October last year, both the brothers Gotabaya, who is the Sri Lankan President, and Mahinda (Prime Minister) have left no stone unturned to reboot their ties with India, which hit a rough patch after the [Hambantota Port incident](#) with the Chinese.

Chinese-built Hambantota Port remains one of New Delhi's biggest concerns. It was through this port that Beijing actually started to yield influence in Sri Lanka.

Immediately after assuming charge, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya made India his first foreign destination in November last year. Similarly, his elder brother, Mahinda, chose to visit India before China after being appointed to the office.

“India has to now deal with the subtle linkage between SAARC and BIMSTEC that our neighbours are doing. This is a big issue to address and to resolve. And this has to be done not just by New Delhi just because it is the biggest country in the region, all other capitals — Colombo, Kathmandu, Dhaka as well as New Delhi — have to be on the same page and reach a consensus on this issue,” said former ambassador Rajiv Bhatia, who is now a Distinguished Fellow at Gateway House.

The next venue for the SAARC Summit is Pakistan, which is also problematic for India. The last summit was held on 26-27 November 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

“Sri Lanka has made it clear that it does not want to take sides between India and China. But they have to get the best from both sides. China is surely taking advantage of this stalemate in SAARC. And this is also true that BIMSTEC is also not seeing much progress,” said Raji Rajagopalan, Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation.

### **President Gotabaya to visit China soon**

According to sources, President Gotabaya may soon embark on a visit to Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping has already sent its special envoy Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Sri Lanka in December last year.

Gotabaya was scheduled to visit Beijing in January, but it got [postponed](#).

Wang [had said in January](#) that China will not allow “any outside influence” to interfere in Colombo’s internal matters.

Sri Lanka now owes a significant debt to China even as Beijing is involved in building several infrastructure projects in the South Asian country, including the Hambantota Port, which is now under Chinese control on a 99-year old lease.

“India knows it cannot match China when it comes to Beijing’s economic leverage. With the leadership of India diminishing in SAARC, China has been able to penetrate into the region deeper and emerging as a big and significant partner,” Rajagopalan said.

“But what India can do is finish projects on time in these countries and not drag them. China, on the other hand, finishes the projects it takes up in these countries before time,”

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