



Modi's SAGAR Concept and SL

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi just concluded a swift 'in-and-out- official visit, for a couple of hours, to Sri Lanka yesterday (9). He was earlier scheduled to fly back from Male to Delhi after his visit to the Maldives from the 7 to 9. However, Modi accepted an invitation extended by President Maithripala Sirisena during the latter's New Delhi visit on 30 May, to participate in the inauguration of Indian Prime Minister's second term in office, for another five years.

Modi Government's 'neighbourhood first' policy and the new Indian concept of SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) clearly shows that New Delhi gives priority to the Indian Ocean region. Introducing the SAGAR Concept, Modi said, "The Indian Ocean Region is one of my foremost policy priorities. Our approach is evident in our vision of SAGAR," which means "ocean" and stands for – Security And Growth for All in the Region. We would continue to actively pursue and promote our geo-political, strategic and economic interests on the seas, in particular the Indian Ocean."

The Indian Premier also said, "to this end, India's modern and multi-dimensional Navy leads from the front. It is a force for peace and good. A network of growing political and economic maritime partnerships, and strengthening of regional frameworks also helps us pursue our goals."

Prime Minister Modi began his second term giving prominence to the region. He was sworn into office in the presence of the heads of state of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the current chair of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the neighbouring Head of Governments.

The Indian Prime Minister, outlining the importance of the Indian Ocean region said that the oceans and world's waterways are global commons -Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam– the concept of whole world as a family – is perhaps most vividly witnessed on the oceans of the planet, "At the same time, the oceans are the lifelines of global prosperity. They present us with great economic opportunities to build our nations. Over 90 per cent of global merchandise trade is carried on the oceans. Over the last 15 years, its value has grown from about 6 trillion dollars to about 20 trillion dollars. Oceans are critical for the global energy security as over 60 per cent of world's oil production moves through sea routes."

Both Sri Lanka and India have a common interest as strategic locations in the Indian Ocean. Our ability to reap economic benefits from the oceans rests on our capacity to respond to the challenges in the maritime domain.

Sea borne terror

The Indian Prime Minister also referred to the threat of sea borne terror, of which India has been a direct victim, continues to endanger the regional and global peace and stability. Stressing the importance of giving proper guidance to the new

policy, Modi named career diplomat Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as the new External Affairs Minister, a rarity in Indian Cabinets where veteran politicians have almost always been in charge of the Foreign Ministry. Jaishankar served in Colombo as a young Indian Foreign Service recruit in the 1980s and ended up as Foreign Secretary after serving as Ambassador in Beijing and Washington.

Indian analysts believe that Jaishankar has the advantage of being an insider within the ranks of the Indian Foreign Service, but also an outsider in the sense of a Cabinet Minister holding high level political office with the authority to reform the Ministry.

Modi commenced his second term at a time when China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is galloping at a breathtaking pace. Barring India, almost the entire South Asian and Indo-Pacific are formally a part of the BRI. New Delhi is highly concerned over the fear of strategic encirclement by China. In the circumstances, India is keen to establish an alternative inter-regional connectivity and commercial networks of its own. Under Modi's plan, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and fresh mechanisms for integrating India closer to Central Asia and Latin America is being pursued.

Modi, while being extremely busy with domestic and international issues, agreed to visit Sri Lanka, though it's a quick air-dash than a relaxed official visit, shows the rapport between Modi and Sirisena as well as the strength of bilateral ties. Sri Lanka fits well into Modi Government's neighbourhood-first policy as well as its Indo-Pacific policy.

As President Sirisena and Prime Minister Modi repeatedly reassured, the relations between the two countries are very strong and there is hardly any mistrust or suspicion. India seems to have accepted that the new found relationship with China is only an economic partnership and that could not be construed a threat to India's national security.

The recent Memorandum of Understanding signed between Sri Lanka, Japan and India to develop the East Terminal of Colombo Port has further cemented the relationship with India. Although, the US has accepted India's role in the security and stability of the Indian Ocean region, Modi is likely to discuss about military pacts between Sri Lanka and US, especially the position with regard to the Acquisition and Cross Services Agreement (ACSA) and proposed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

On the other hand there is an understanding between the need for cooperation between India and the US to check the rapidly expanding Chinese influence in this region. India is also concerned and will seek assurance with regard to growing relationship between China and Sri Lanka. Indian Prime Minister's short visit will be useful for Sri Lanka to keep India informed about Sri Lanka's intended military cooperation with the United States and economic cooperation with China.

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