Sri Lanka is India’s closest maritime neighbor and is just 30 nautical miles away from the territorial boundary. India has deep historical and cultural ties with this island nation.

**Background of Sri Lanka and History of Civil War**

- Tamils and Sinhalese are the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese eternal conflict with Tamils for power had been gathering strength since before independence.
- Many Tamils attended English language schools which were the passport to higher education and better employment in the colonial period. And the Tamil-dominated Northern Province had comparatively better facilities in terms of education and employment.
- Post independence Sinhalese nationalism sought to curb the Tamil presence in education and civil administration. In 1949 Indian Tamil plantation workers disenfranchised, the start of a wave of Sinhalese nationalism which alienates the Tamil people in the region.
- The passing of the infamous “Sinhalese Only Bill” in 1956 was an another attempt in the same lines.
- The constitutional provisions in the 1972 Constitution favoring the Sinhalese language and Buddhist religion, along with their educational policies convinced many Tamils that they had been perceived as a marginal community.
As a result of open discrimination, in 1976 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed to fight for Tamil rights and in 1983 Civil war started

India’s role in Civil war and its implications

- The bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka deteriorated in 1980’s with a rising of the Tamil militant separatism in Sri Lanka.
- In 1987 with the objective of improving the ties, Indo-Sri Lankan Accord was signed between India and Sri Lanka.
- It proposed a political solution to the Sri Lanka’s conflict by establishing a provincial council system and devolution of power for nine provinces in Sri Lanka. (This is popularly known as The Thirteenth Amendment (13A) to the Constitution of Sri Lanka)
- India also deployed Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka intended to perform a peacekeeping (It is known as Operation Pawan, which ultimately resulted in the assassination of PM Rajiv Gandhi).
- After two years of constant military engagement, the IPKF was withdrawn as it failed to defeat LTTE.
- Finally, in 2009, 25 years of violence ended when Sri Lankan government seized the last area controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels. India at that point of agreed to reconstruct the war-torn areas and started many rehabilitation programs.
- However, the pro-LTTE governments in Tamil Nadu influenced the decisions of Central Government which posed a roadblock in humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka.
Also, the relationship started deteriorating when India voted against Sri Lanka in 2009, 2012 and 2013 at the US-sponsored UNHRC resolution to investigate alleged human rights violations by the state against the Tamil rebels

India-Sri Lanka Relations: Areas of cooperation:

Human resource development:

- Sri Lankan students can also appear for National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) in centers in India for MBBS/BDS admissions. IIT JEE (Advanced) entrance examinations have commenced in Sri Lanka from 2017.
- Prime Minister Modi has announced the extension of the Indian-aided ambulance service to more areas in Sri Lanka.

Indian Community: According to unofficial statistics, it is estimated that around 14,000 Indian expatriates are living in Sri Lanka. Tamil Diaspora are mostly employed in either tea or rubber plantations.

Cultural Relations:

The cultural and trade ties between Sri Lanka is very strong.
The People of Indian Origin (PIOs) comprise Sindhis, Gujaratis, Memons, Parsis, Malayalis and Telugu speaking persons who have settled down in Sri Lanka and are engaged in various business ventures.

Though their numbers (10,000 approx.) are much lesser as compared to Indian Origin Tamils (IOTs), they are economically prosperous and are well settled. Each of these communities has their own groups which organize festivals and cultural events.

The Cultural Cooperation Agreement has been signed between both the countries.
The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo actively promotes awareness of Indian culture by offering classes in Indian music, dance, Hindi, and Yoga. Every year, cultural troops from both countries exchange visits.

Buddhism is a connecting link between India and Sri Lanka on religious lines.
Education is another important area of cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. India offers scholarship slots annually to deserving Sri Lankan students.
Tourism also forms an important link between India and Sri Lanka. India is the largest source of market for Sri Lankan tourism.

Commerce/Trade Relations:

- Sri Lanka is India’s second largest trading partner in SAARC.
- India and Sri Lanka signed FTA in 1998, which facilitated increased trade relations between the two countries.
Sri Lanka is one of India’s largest trading partners in SAARC. Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the entry into force of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000.

Sri Lanka has long been a priority destination for direct investment from India. India is among the top four investors in Sri Lanka with cumulative investments of over US$ 1 billion since 2003.

Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement (ETCA): The proposed ETCA between India and Sri Lanka would facilitate trade in services, investments and technological cooperation. With ETCA signed, Indian investments will flow into Sri Lanka to make the island’s production facilities part of the Indian and international value chain.

Sri Lanka is one of India’s largest trading partners among the SAARC countries. India in turn is Sri Lanka’s largest trade partner globally.

India’s exports to Sri Lanka amounted to $5.3 billion in 2015-17 whereas its imports from the country were at $743 million.

The agreement CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) which is yet to be signed between the countries, seeks to build on the momentum generated by the FTA and take the two economies beyond trade in goods towards greater integration and impart renewed impetus and synergy to bilateral economic interaction.

The investments are in diverse areas including petroleum retail, IT, financial services, real estate, telecommunication, hospitality & tourism, banking and food processing (tea & fruit juices), metal industries, tires, cement, glass manufacturing, and infrastructure development (railway, power, water supply).
Development Cooperation:

The Indian Housing Project, with an initial commitment to build 50,000 houses for the war affected as well as the estate workers in the plantation areas, is Government of India (GoI)’s flagship project of developmental assistance to Sri Lanka.

Tourism:

India is a top source for tourist influx into Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan tourists too are among the top ten sources for the Indian tourism market.

Defence and Security Cooperation:

- Colombo and New Delhi have long history of security cooperation. In recent years, the two sides have steadily increased their military-to-military relationship.
- India and Sri Lanka conducts joint Military (‘Mitra Shakti’) and Naval exercise (SLINEX).
- India also provides defence training to Sri Lankan forces.
- A trilateral maritime security cooperation agreement was signed by India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives to improve surveillance, anti-piracy operations and reducing maritime pollution in Indian Ocean Region.
- In April 2019, India and Sri Lanka also concluded agreement on countering Drug and Human trafficking.
- In the aftermath of the horrific Easter bombings, Sri Lankan Prime Minister thanked the Indian government for all the “help” given.
- The most significant aspect is that of civilian nuclear co-operation, which envisages an “exchange of knowledge and expertise, sharing of resources, capacity building and training of personnel in peaceful uses of nuclear energy.
• The third joint exercise, called “Dosti,” is a trilateral coast guard exercise that includes the Maldives.

**India-Sri Lanka: Issues and Conflicts:**

There are a few areas over which there is minor contention between India and Sri Lanka.

**Strategic Issues – China factor:**

• In recent years, China has extended billions of dollars of loans to the Sri Lankan government for new infrastructure projects.
• This is not good for India’s strategic depth in Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
• Sri Lanka handed over the strategic port of Hambantota, which is expected to play a key role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, to China on a 99-year lease.
• It has also been supplying arms to Srilanka.
• China has invested sufficiently in building Colombo international container terminal by China Harbor Corporation.

• In the period of low profile relationship between the two nations, Sri Lanka apparently started favoring China over India.
• As part of Maritime Silk Route (MSR) policy, China built two ports, one in Colombo and another in Hambantota.
• China has also collaborated in satellite launching activities with Supreme SAT (Pvt.), Sri Lanka’s only satellite operator.

**India’s efforts to counter China:**

In 2014 India abstained from voting on a UNHRC resolution calling for a probe into alleged war crimes by Sri Lanka. And it helped to revamp the century-old relationship with Sri Lanka. (While Pakistan and China voted against the resolution)
• In a sign of a closer strategic partnership between Sri Lanka and India, they signed civil nuclear cooperation agreement which is Sri Lanka’s first nuclear partnership with any country.

• In the wake of China’s economic dominance in the island, India is also entering into Sri Lanka’s mega project business in a big way by focusing on infrastructure development in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

• India is also planning to build Trincomalee Port. The port is envisioned as an Indian counterweight to Chinese developments at Hambantota Port.

**Fisherman Problem:**

• Indian boats have been fishing in the troubled waters of Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar for centuries.

• In 1974 and 1976 treaties were signed between the two countries to demarcate International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).

• However, the treaties failed to factor in the hardship of thousands of traditional fishermen who were forced to restrict themselves to a meagre area in their fishing forays.

• The small islet of Katchatheevu, used by them for sorting their catch and drying their nets, fell on the other side of the IMBL.
• Fishermen often risk their lives and cross the IMBL rather than return empty-handed.
• However, the high alert Sri Lankan Navy have either arrested or destroyed fishing nets and vessels of those who have crossed the line.

To deal with the issue of detention of fishermen in a humane manner, India and Sri Lanka have set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries as the mechanism to help find a permanent solution. The first meeting took place in December 2016 in New Delhi and second meeting in Colombo on April 07, 2017. The next round of Ministerial-level talks and JWG meetings were held during October 2017 at New Delhi.
**Katchatheevu Island:**

It is an uninhabited island that India ceded to Sri Lanka in 1974 based on a conditional agreement called “Kachchativu island pact”.

Later on, Sri Lanka declared Katchatheevu, a sacred land given the presence of a Catholic shrine

- The central government recognizes Sri Lanka’s sovereignty over the island as per the 1974 accord. But Tamil Nadu claimed that Katchatheevu falls under the Indian territory and Tamil fishermen have traditionally believed that it belongs to them and therefore want to preserve the right to fish there.

**Significance of India – Sri Lanka relations:**

- Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, just a few kilometers from the Indian coast and near one of the busiest sea lanes in the world – one that carries much of the oil.
- Indo-Chinese competition in the Indian Ocean: India believes that China’s interest in Sri Lanka and its growing footprint there is part of an encirclement strategy to contain India.
- India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ Policy: Sri Lanka is at the core of our 'Neighbourhood First' policy and Sagar doctrine.
- The Sri Lankan Tamils — India is concerned about the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils devastated by war and is working for their rehabilitation.
- Maritime interests: it is important for the coast guards of the two countries to establish the safety and security of the Indian Ocean region.
• “Strategic significance” of the nuclear agreement: Sri Lanka’s decision to sign a nuclear agreement with India rather than Pakistan, with which it had explored a similar pact two years ago, “shows the importance Sri Lanka attaches to its relations with New Delhi.”

• **International cooperation:**
  o Sri Lanka is an active partner in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
  o Sri Lanka, with its geo-strategic location as well as its diverse experience in maritime safety and security issues, contributes much to Indian Ocean Rim Association – IORA.

Both countries also cooperate in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

**Way forward:**

• The Sri Lankan President has described India as “our closest neighbour and long-standing friend”. He assured that cooperation with India is multifaceted with priority given to security-related matters while cooperation with other countries are largely economic and commercial.

• Given the mutual trust and historical ties, both countries should work together to strengthen their multi-dimensional partnership. In line with India’s ‘neighbourhood first’ policy and SAGAR doctrine, primacy should be given to relationship with Sri Lanka.

• Meanwhile Srilanka should carry forward the process of reconciliation, to fulfill the aspirations of the Tamils for equality, justice, peace and respect. Counter-
terrorism will be a big area of cooperation between Colombo and New Delhi which requires detailed intelligence sharing.

- Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) must be signed to improve the economic cooperation between both countries.
- The biggest advantage that India has over China when it comes to bilateral ties with Sri Lanka is its deep civilizational and cultural connect.
- Sri Lanka’s first nuclear partnership with any country was signed with India.
- Chinese funding in infrastructure projects is blamed of lacking transparency, pushing participating smaller nations in a debt-trap (e.g. Hambantota port deal), having devastating social and environmental impact and even serving to undermine sovereignty.
- Counter-terrorism: the two countries must improve cooperation in counter-terror training as India has vast experience in this arena.
- Maritime cooperation: It "may include measures such as joint naval patrolling, controlling of smuggling and piratical activities, and the strengthening of communication networks."

- **Conclusion:**

Despite some of the pending issues, the relations between the two neighbors in IOR look to be going forward. Trade between the two has grown rapidly after the entry into force of FTA in 2000. It may be hoped that the ethnic and fishermen issues may also get resolved in near future with better relations being on track. Indias view the Palk Bay region as a common heritage of the two countries and Sri Lankan assurance that Sri Lankan soil will not be used by anyone against India,