

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

Let me begin by thanking the organisers, *The Hindu*, for inviting me to be part of this prestigious event. I believe that sharing ideas and learning from one another is key to our understanding one another better, which is why forums like this can assist in exploring new opportunities, pathways and brighter possibilities for cooperation. I would like to also take this opportunity to particularly extend my warm greetings to my friend of many decades who is present here today, Shri Ram, whose friendship and insights over the years I have greatly valued.

I am indeed happy to be amongst you to share a few thoughts on the future direction of India-Sri Lanka relations. Many academics, politicians, students, bureaucrats and perhaps other groups of people have studied, spoken and deliberated on this subject in the past, and I believe this —

no matter at which point in history we consider it — is a topic of utmost importance to both our states and people.

Often I have said “India is our relation”, and the bonds between us are unique. We are neighbours, bound by ties of geographical proximity, of a shared history and a shared system of values and culture. We are one family. And as with any family, the journey is not always smooth or trouble-free. I don’t intend focussing on these ups and downs of our relationship, but would venture to say that through an active dialogue any misunderstandings could be averted, as has been demonstrated in our recent dealings with each other.

If we delve into the past of our relationship, we could see forays by invaders from India as much as extremely fruitful and seminal visits by religious leaders. The three celebrated visits of the Buddha were landmarks and unique

milestones in the history of Sri Lanka. The later visits by Arahant Mahinda and his sister Theri Sanghamitta have left indelible marks in our culture and way of life. In fashioning our future relationship, these strengths must be examined and understood. In much later times, the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on our national thought processes too should be taken into reckoning when our relationship is fashioned and moulded. I see that in all these, on the part of India, there was an act of giving something and Sri Lanka was the recipient. Buddhism was the endowment that we cherish most.

Our bilateral relations have not always been what it should be. There have been good times as well as not-so-good times in our relations. Nevertheless, it is important for both Sri Lankans and Indians to understand the trends that would shape relations between both our countries and also to explore how best we could nurture the relationship that could mutually benefit us.

However, through it all, both states have always respected and stayed true to the Non-Aligned Movement's principles of sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence.

I can talk to you today about dark times past, when both our nations experienced the threat and terror that comes from a few who irresponsibly use innocent lives to fulfil their own selfish objectives — a thirst for power and violence that claimed the lives of leaders from both our nations. But all of you present here know the history of our relations. You know about how strained ties were in the 1980s when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who found safe haven in India, assassinated [former] Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and were the cause behind the death of over 1,500 Indian soldiers. The 1980s was undoubtedly the most troubled period in our bilateral relationship. And even though all of us in this room know this past, it's

important to briefly recall the journey along with the mistakes we've made, in order to ensure we learn from them and move toward a future that is not riddled with incidents that could have been or should have been avoided.

If we are to delve a little into the history of our seven-decade-long political relationship, we see that there are two major breakdowns in our bilateral relationship, in the 1980s and in 2014, which have had serious consequences for both nations.

Just before we entered the decade of the 1980s, the good relations between India and Sri Lanka had reached new heights. A period of excellence in bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka was the 1970s when Mrs. Indira Gandhi was in power in India and Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka. Both leaders were women, their respective political parties shared much the same ideology and foreign policy, and personal

friendships were established between their families. This spilled over into President J.R. Jayawardene's time and he too maintained excellent relations with the Janata Party Government that was elected to power in India in 1977.

In fact, whilst visiting Sri Lanka in February 1979, addressing Parliament Prime Minister Moraji Desai stated that the problems that were inherited from the colonial past of both countries have been resolved through goodwill and negotiations. He also stated that both nations now stood on the threshold of a new era of cooperation.

History has also shown us that there is no need for similarities in ideology or foreign policy between the parties ruling India and Sri Lanka to share a good working relationship. Post-independence, the new government of Sri Lanka was right-wing and pro-west, while the

government of India led by Jawaharlal Nehru was more socialist, centrist and non-aligned. Yet, the relationship between India and Sri Lanka during Prime Minister Nehru's era was extremely good.

In fact, when the newly independent Sri Lanka wanted to obtain membership of the United Nations, the Soviet Union vetoed our application because they did not believe that Ceylon was really an independent nation. As a dutiful neighbour, Nehru got his Ambassadors in Moscow and in the UN to lobby on our behalf and to convince the USSR of Ceylon's actual political and constitutional status as an independent nation.

Since the 1980s the relationship between our two countries remained very fragile. But in 2005 when I was elected President, I made it a point to establish a good working relationship with India.

You would recollect that a novel mechanism was in place during our time in government, and in particular when we as a country fought against the most cruel terrorist organisation in the world. The Troika, as it was known, helped in no small measure to build a bridge between the leaderships and the associated thought processes of our two countries and thus prevented any misunderstandings when Sri Lanka was engaged in a crucial war against terrorism. It was the friendly and casual nature of the relationship between the two groups that formed the Troika that produced the desired outcome.

I say without any hesitation that India's deep understanding of our government's motive was a key factor that helped us to eradicate terrorism. The respective leaderships were consistently and continuously briefed by the relevant Troika, thus

promoting the high level of understanding that was required to keep the relationship dynamic.

In 2014, the second major breakdown of bilateral relationships took place. The government that had ruled India for a decade was voted out in 2014. Unfortunately, the working relationship that existed between my government and the outgoing government of India did not roll over to the new government of India formed in 2014. Lack of communication between both parties seems to have led to this situation. Communication is such a vital factor that can be the make-or-break [factor] in strengthening our countries' relations. Therefore, an open line of healthy and constant communication should always be the focus even in the coming years.

Because we know now in hindsight that the misunderstandings of the 1980s as well as that of 2014 were aberrations that could easily have

been avoided, it's key that India and Sri Lanka evolve a mechanism to prevent these misunderstandings from taking place.

Despite the snag of 2014, the Opposition coalition that I lead now has a good understanding with the ruling party in India. In their dealings with Sri Lanka, my suggestion to India is that the rule of thumb with regard to India-Sri Lanka relations should be that if the outgoing party had an adequate working relationship with Sri Lanka, the incoming party should give due recognition to that fact and continue the relationship on that basis. Past experience has shown that the danger of disruption in our bilateral relationship arises in the immediate aftermath of changes of government. Such easily avoidable disruptions have had serious consequences for both countries.

I hope my discussion of history has not been too boring, but it's important to recall, to understand, what we've done right over the years and ensure we correct where we went wrong.

Now in reflecting on the future of India-Sri Lanka relations, it is useful to identify the main elements having [a] bearing on the relationship and focus on how we can better that relationship.

The traditional government-to-government dealings alone cannot give shape to our future relations because the world is becoming more complex by the day. However, political leaders would continue to play the most coveted role as they determine the policies, be it foreign, economic, security, and a host of other policies that would impinge on our bilateral relations. Tangibles like these are easier to monitor and even control, but intangibles pose grave threats. Political leaders and other societal leaders must always keep a tab on the intangibles; for

instance, a wrong word from a leader would sour the relations, as we have witnessed in the past.

It would not be out of place for me to state upfront that a strong mechanism at the country-to-country level fully endorsed and supported by each of our governments should be in place to clear any misunderstandings that may crop up from time to time. The Troika system should have been a forum that we continued, and perhaps there is still opportunity to bring it back from 2020.

It is a truism that the world has become smaller due to modern methods of transport and communication. In a relationship between two parties, and in this case between two countries, inevitably there are the third parties involved in determining how the relationship would be. These third parties will play an important role in influencing our relationship. Therefore, we need

to look at not only ourselves but others as well to determine what our future would be.

In the case of our two countries, there are those geographically near as well as far. To what extent these entities can influence us must be borne in the minds of the leaders. Whatever the influence is, as long as the two countries in the relationship clearly understand the foundations on which it is built, nothing could be done to jeopardise the relationship. In today's world, therefore, bilateral relations cannot be narrowly envisioned.

Future bilateral relations would be influenced by many other factors, among which national security, political stability, economic and social well-being, modern communication technology, climate, international transport would play key roles.

For Sri Lanka and India, national security is vital. In future, it would be crucially important given the destructive forces that operate now and also those that would spring up in the future. It is natural for countries like us which are so closely bound together to be sensitive to our national security issues. Of course, national security is not just focussing on military strength or any other related ability; it is my understanding that national security encompasses many aspects that would impact on the well-being of a nation.

The issue of national security needs to be understood in the right perspective. Regional terrorism influenced by international terrorism will greatly affect how we, Sri Lanka and India, look at each other. Since we are geographically in very close proximity, we have mutual obligations to ensure the security of each other. Often, we have heard Indian leaders emphasising the need for Sri Lanka to ensure that the Sri Lankan soil is not used by any third

party that would pose a threat to India. Similarly, we too would want India to ensure that any threat from any groups operating within Indian soil does not pose a threat to Sri Lanka.

Interestingly, in recent times, maritime security in the Indian Ocean has become an important issue in regard to respective national security of our two countries. In future bilateral relations, Indian Ocean maritime security too would be an important aspect in forging a well-founded strategy. In all these, I strongly believe that a vibrant, on-going dialogue between the two countries would ensure each other's national security. This dialogue, as I have emphasised earlier, should transcend the normal diplomatic boundaries, and there are experiences such as the Troika that we could draw from.

Through the Troika, we can go further to create forums and collaborations that take into consideration the pressing social, economic and

cultural issues that affect our peoples, and elaborate on best practices and advances that we could learn from one another. The formulation of such an entity is foremost in my party's plans for the future.

When addressing political stability, as we have seen in the recent past, this is one of the most crucial factors that would determine the character of our future relations. If any of our two countries has political turmoil and instability, foreign relations would be put on the back-burner.

A strong government and political stability would always facilitate the blossoming of bilateral relations. In future bilateral relations between our two countries strong political leadership would be a key factor towards a vibrant bilateral relationship.

As much as political stability on either side would influence the strength and quality of our future

relationship, our economic stability too would be a key influential factor for future relations. Economic stability encompasses many subsets and [a] majority of these subsets such as food security of each of our two countries would influence to what extent our bilateral relations would prosper.

An important facet of economic stability is how we look at our national assets. No country, in my understanding, can achieve economic stability by disposing of national assets. I would emphasise that a policy advocating sale of national assets inevitably generates tensions among our people, and this has a negative effect on our relations with the country acquiring these assets, whatever that country may be. This has been our stark experience in the recent past. This does not however mean we should not explore joint initiatives for mutual benefit.

An example is the disposable income of our people. A Sri Lankan would choose as his first choice of international travel, India. This is certainly true for many Buddhists but the money he can put aside for international travel matters. It is when people travel from one to the other that they would understand the mind-sets and even go on to forge personal relations. This may seem to be an insignificant detail, but all these matter when we speak of bilateral relations.

Today, the whole world, even remote communities, use modern communication technologies. Bilateral relations too would be greatly influenced depending on to what extent countries have advanced in the field of Information and Communication Technology. Both our countries have large rural communities and ICTs would greatly facilitate these communities to become prosperous and productive and thereby enhance their quality of life.

During our time in government, we made huge strides to take ICTs to the most remote communities and enable them to use such technologies in their day-to-day life. Cheap telephone rates and affordable Internet use will undoubtedly promote connectivity between communities in each of our countries.

I am a strong believer in fostering people-to-people relations; it goes without saying then that travel between our two countries must be made much easier. Sri Lankan Airlines has the largest number of flights into Indian cities. The government of India has taken vigorous initiatives to assist pilgrims from Sri Lanka in every way. Border control measures should be in place but with a friendly face.

In this context, partnerships, collaborations and similar relationships matter very much. We need much stronger relationships between similar groups such as academia; business leaders;

social, cultural and religious communities; research groups and think-tanks; and our respective bureaucracies. Formal links between our respective foreign ministries alone would not be sufficient. This is why forums such as this is so very important in bridging that gap.

Exactly how this relationship will evolve, we cannot foretell. But the foundations of our relationship is certainly too strong to be shaken by passing tempests. We need to harness the quality of our human resources and our rapidly improving technology in our mutual interest. We have the institutional mechanism for this purpose; and the will of our leaders will serve as the dominant factor in strengthening our relationship further. We are now in that critical period and I cannot stress enough on the importance of having strong leaders at both ends with the will to move progressively in the right direction, particularly with this being an election year in both India and in Sri Lanka.

As in any key partnership the strength or the weakness of the past relations would determine how strong or weak the future relations would be. Here Sri Lanka and India stand tall because of our bonds that run into thousands of years. Our two countries are so bound to each other in innumerable ways. The culture of the Indian sub-continent is unique and that alone should provide us with the platform on which we should build and nurture our relationship. We are two nations that have a remarkable range and depth in our relationship. That, my friends, should never be forgotten in fashioning our future cooperation.

I believe it's now time for me to conclude. Let me therefore express my warm thanks to *The Hindu* newspaper for your kind invitation to participate in this prestigious event. I have greatly enjoyed my interaction with you, and I

wish your event all success. May the Noble Triple Gem bless you all.