

# Security threat to India is threat to Lanka: Envoy Moragoda

Any security threat to India is also a security threat to Sri Lanka, Lankan High Commissioner Milinda Moragoda told *Times Of India* as he sought to reassure the Indian government that in line with their bilateral agreement and understanding, the island nation won't allow its ports to be used by a foreign country in any manner that is prejudicial to India's interests.

Describing India as the key to "sustainable" economic recovery of debtridden Sri Lanka, the High Commissioner said that the strategically located country is exploring with India trilateral cooperation opportunities with Japan, Israel and UAE.

According to Moragoda, Sri Lanka wants economic integration with India which, he said, will allow the country to expand its existing economic model and ensure quicker recovery from the debt crisis it's facing. Asked about the recent con-

trovery over the docking of a Chinese "spy vessel" at the Hambantota port, Moragoda said Sri Lanka is in talks with India to finalise a mechanism that would allow the two countries to address such issues.

"If we can hitch on to India, when you move we can move too. Geopolitical issues, in my view, will get resolved on their own once this economic integration with India takes place. Of course, till then we need to have dialogue, develop understanding and ensure we don't cross the red lines," said Moragoda.

"Our security concerns are totally in line. The basic principle is that we believe what is a security threat to India is also a security threat to us and we assume India also thinks the same," he added.

While the supply of essential commodities in Sri Lanka has improved, the country is grappling with food inflation which

has reached 80 per cent. Sri Lanka is currently having debt-restructuring talks with India, which has provided assistance worth \$ 3.8 billion to the country this year, China and the Paris Club creditors. The talks, which are important for Lanka to access an IMF bailout package, are reported to have been impeded by India-China rivalry for influence in Sri Lanka. "The package may not be huge but a certificate of good economic engagement from the IMF is important. It will encourage investment, and also exports. I don't think it (India-China rivalry) has affected the talks but it's a fact that



Milinda

politics in our region has entered a dangerous phase. There's no question that geopolitics has a bearing on every aspect of what we do," he said.

Sri Lanka believes that trilateral cooperation will help expedite its economic recovery by attracting more investments. "President Wickremesinghe discussed trilateral cooperation with India and Japan during his visit to Tokyo. Renewables, petroleum, telecom and ports are four sectors where India, Sri Lanka and Japan can work together," said Moragoda, adding discussions are also on with Israel for trilateral cooperation in agriculture. The UAE is another country Sri Lanka is hoping to attract investments from, through trilateral cooperation, involving India.

While India has said at the UN Human Rights Council that Sri Lanka hasn't done enough to fulfil its commitments on the Tamil issue under the 13th Constitutional

Amendment, Moragoda said there was nothing new in what the Indian government had said. "The nuance may have changed but India has been very consistent on the substance part of it. Politically, Sri Lanka is in a transition phase and there is a need to renegotiate the social and political compact in the country. Sri Lanka is a complex country with many religions and ethnicities. This issue (13th Amendment) also falls under the same category. We have to work out a new compact," he said.

Moragoda added Lanka is looking to intensify cooperation with India in areas like tourism, electricity, petroleum and connectivity. "Sustainable recovery is important and we would like to look at ways we can integrate with the Indian economy. Had we integrated with the Indian economy earlier, we would have grown very, very fast," he said.