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**MOUs, MEDIA AND MISSTEPS:
COMMUNICATION AND CREDIBILITY IN
INDO-SRI LANKA RELATIONS**

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MOUs, Media, and Missteps: Communication and Credibility in Indo-Sri Lanka Relations

Shakthi De Silva*

Among Sri Lankan citizens, no bilateral relationship is more hotly discussed than the island's ties with its closest neighbour and the South Asian subcontinent's regional hegemon — India. The small Indian Ocean Island has, in antiquity, been the subject of invasions and occupations by regional Indian Kingdoms. After independence, the island chose to retain its defence agreement with the British, partly due to its concern about India's strategic ambitions in the region.¹ As the island's internal armed conflict raged on, South Indian states provided sanctuary for terrorists while the Indian central government deployed aircrafts into Sri Lanka's airspace without seeking permission in advance.² Although Indo-Sri Lanka relations have improved considerably since then, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, the recently concluded Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Indo-Sri Lanka defence cooperation reignited public concern over India's strategic objectives, especially given longstanding perceptions within Indian strategic circles that view Sri Lanka as an "aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast".³

In situations like this, decisive and quick communication is imperative. A few days after the MOU was signed, the Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake assured

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¹ Shakthi De Silva, "Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging? Independent Ceylon's Reaction to Regional Hegemony", *South Asian Survey* 22:2 (2018), 189-209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523117753929>

² Kumar Rupesinghe, "Ethnic conflicts in South Asia: The case of Sri Lanka and the Indian Peace-Keeping Force", *Journal of Peace Research* 25:4 (1988), 337-350 <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234338802500402>; Shelton Kodikara, "International Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Involvement of India and Non-State Actors", *Security Dialogue* 18:4 (1987), 637-648 <https://doi.org/10.1177/096701068701800415>; Sumit Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War", *Daedalus* 147:1 (2018), 78-98 https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00475

³ Shivshankar Menon, *Choices* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 96; India-Sri Lanka MOU on Defence signed in April 2025. See, Samatha Mallempati, "India-Sri Lanka MoU on Defence Cooperation: An Important Shift in Policy", *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 7 May 2025, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=12855&lid=7855

the public that the MOU formalises ongoing defence cooperation with India.⁴ The Secretary to the Ministry of Defence added that the MOU had been “meticulously scrutinized”, received approval from the Sri Lankan Cabinet of Ministers and was in accordance with domestic laws.⁵ Even so, the message failed to resonate with sections of the public, providing the opposition space to put forward several baseless accusations, which further fueled public suspicion.⁶

This incident teaches us a very important lesson in governance and intelligence sharing. While the government was under no obligation to disclose the full contents of the MOU, it was imperative to challenge misinformation decisively. By failing to go on the offensive against the opposition’s speculations, the government ceded control of the narrative. This allowed the seeding of uncertainty in the minds of the electorate at a time when reassurance and clarity were needed. As I have alluded elsewhere, when left in the dark, citizens are more susceptible to populist mobilisations and misinformation campaigns, which can threaten the continuity of bilateral ties between the two neighbours.⁷

That said, this does not mean that governments should dominate or control the media, as was the case during Mahinda Rajapaksa's tenure. Rajan and Elijah Hoole describe that period from 2005 to 2015 as the “darkest days for media freedoms in the country. Media institutions critical of the regime were stoned, raided and set ablaze. Journalists who thought and wrote independently were abducted, tortured or murdered”.⁸ The Rajapaksa regime effectively monopolised the mainstream media narrative, blocking alternative viewpoints on most local television channels. This heavy-handed control,

⁴ “President clarifies details of defence agreement with India”, *NewsWire*, last modified 8 April 2025, <https://www.newswire.lk/2025/04/08/president-clarifies-details-of-defence-agreement-with-india/>; Shakthi De Silva, “Strengthening Indo-Sri Lanka relations in a troubling environment”, *Daily News*, last modified 21 April 2025, <https://www.dailynews.lk/2025/04/21/featured/763772/strengthening-indo-sri-lanka-relations-in-a-troubling-international-environment/>

⁵ Asiri Fernando, “Indo-Lanka defence relations: MoU to streamline cooperation”, *The Morning*, last modified 6 April 2025, <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/tvLkqjQTB5S9D3fMsgkw>

⁶ “FSP slams proposed defence accord with India, claims betrayal of national interests”, *The Leader*, last modified 3 April 2025, <https://lankaleader.lk/news/12899-fsp-slams-proposed-defence-accord-with-india-claims-betrayal-of-national-interests>

⁷ Shakthi De Silva, *Bridging trust deficits: unpacking structural challenges in Indo-Sri Lanka relations* (Centre for Law and Security Studies, 2025).

⁸ Rajan Hoole and Elijah Hoole, “Free and Fair Media: A distant dream for Sri Lanka.” In *Press Freedom in Contemporary Asia*, edited by Tina Burrett and Jeff Kingston. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 343.

however, pushed citizens to turn to social media as an alternative space where “cartoons, jokes, puns and gossip [criticizing the government was shared] ...offering a picture of the regime very different from the docile and compliant state media’s portrayal” of events.⁹ The current government must continue to resist the temptation to emulate this model of governance. Manipulating or intimidating media companies may provide short-term relief from criticism, but it ultimately erodes the democratic foundations necessary for long-term legitimacy.¹⁰

What must be done – both for the sake of enhancing bilateral relations with India and preserving internal harmony in a multi-ethnic and religious polity – is to provide space for private media institutions and social media users to freely express their opinions and, when necessary, hold the government accountable. In doing so, however, governments must strike a balance. Misinformation and disinformation can spread rapidly, sowing distrust and division – a perilous security threat in a society that has witnessed attacks against minority religious communities in recent years. To address this, governments in Sri Lanka and other South Asian nations must act swiftly to nip falsehoods in the bud and collaborate with think tanks to strengthen existing fact-checking mechanisms. More importantly, in an era where social media influencers hold significant sway over public opinion, governments should focus on amplifying their voices by adopting communication techniques that resonate with younger generations. Through this approach, they can strive to preserve civic freedoms while countering harmful narratives.

⁹ Nira Wickramasinghe, “Mahinda Rajapaksa: From populism to Authoritarianism”, in *Contemporary Populists in Power*, eds. Alain Dieckhoff, Christophe Jaffrelot and Elise Massicard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 126.

¹⁰ In this regard, the Online Safety Act of 2024 — which experts argue establishes a framework for expanded censorship, mass surveillance, and authoritarian control – is particularly concerning. While the current Sri Lankan government has scheduled stakeholder discussions to amend it, some contend that the Act must be repealed. For more see Sanjana Hattotuwa, “Sri Lanka’s Online Safety Act: A year in review, and framework for reform”, *Global Network Initiative*, last modified March 03, 2025, <https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/sri-lankas-online-safety-act-a-year-in-review-and-framework-for-reform/>; Gamini Peiris, “Repeal of Online Safety Act vital for economic salvation of Sri Lanka,” *The Island*, last modified April 24, 2025, <https://island.lk/repeal-of-online-safety-act-vital-for-economic-salvation-of-sri-lanka/>

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