

## **Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka: A New Dynamic to Bilateral Ties**

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### **Summary**

*Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe's official visit to Sri Lanka on 27 April 2021 has sparked a conversation on strengthening defence ties between the two countries. This paper sheds light on the gradual growth in military relations and explains the significance of adding this new dimension to the existing solid bilateral relationship.*

### **Introduction**

General Wei Fenghe, Defence Minister and a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, [officially visited](#) to Sri Lanka between 27 and 29 April 2021, with a delegation of 37 high-ranking officials. General Wei is also a member of the Central Military Committee and State Councilor. He is the second senior official to visit Sri Lanka in less than a year. In October 2020, foreign policy chief Yang Jiechi visited Colombo, marking the first-ever Chinese visit in the South Asian region since the COVID-19 pandemic. While the visit has been reported to be a routine ministerial visit to boost political, economic and military cooperation, it also emphasises the growing military dimension of Sino-Sri Lankan ties.

### **Growth in Military Ties since the End of the War**

Despite having solid bilateral economic and political relations, the growth in military ties between Sri Lanka and China is a relatively recent phenomenon. For years, Sri Lanka's military relations with Beijing mainly focused on arms trade. According to Stockholm Peace Research Institute, China is Sri Lanka's largest arms supplier, having traded military equipment worth [US\\$749 million](#) (S\$1 billion) since 1959. China's arms trade with Sri Lanka between 2000 and 2008 was US\$271 million (S\$362.15 million). This has contributed immensely to the military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

However, there had been no significant bilateral military interaction between the two countries, with the exemption of a visit by Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaranatunga in 2005 in the capacity of defence minister. Additionally, two Jiangwei II-class frigates refuelling in Colombo on their way to Pakistan in March 2007 was the first time in 20 years that the People's Liberation Army Navy visited a Sri Lankan port. These interactions were relatively trivial in comparison to Sri Lanka's military ties with India and Pakistan. Thus, arms sale figures substantiated China's role in defeating the LTTE.

Notably, this nature of the relationship has changed since the end of the war in 2009. Apart from continued arms purchase, which has significantly declined in volume, there is an increase in the bilateral military interactions. Chinese warship Wenzhou paid a port call to Colombo in January 2010 for the first time, followed by the missile destroyer Lanzhou in

December 2010. In August 2012, General Liang Guanglie, State Councilor and Minister of National Defence, visited Sri Lanka, marking the first visit by a Chinese defence minister. Since then, Sri Lanka and China's defence and military experienced an upward trajectory. China participated in joint exercises with Sri Lankan tri-forces, including the Cormorant Strike which was initiated in 2010.

## Significance of the Visit

General Wei's visit is an extension of already growing defence and military ties between the two countries. It followed his visit to [Vietnam](#) and [Bangladesh](#). According to official statements released by the Sri Lankan and Chinese sides, the bilateral discussions were fruitful and focused on strengthening relations in all sectors, including the military. Apart from the minister's meeting with Sri Lanka's [President](#) and the [Prime Minister](#), the Chinese delegation held [bilateral discussions](#) with high ranking defence officials led by Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary during which the Military Assistance Protocol was [signed](#). Moreover, the two countries [discussed](#) enhancing pragmatic cooperation in the military field. The [launch](#) of the official website of the Chinese National Defence University Alumni Association of Sri Lanka is among the most notable events during the visit. It shows the emphasis given to building military-to-military ties, and knowledge sharing between the two countries.

Sri Lanka has been sending its officers to train at China's defence colleges since Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's time. However, the number is relatively low compared to those trained in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As former colonies of the British empire, these militaries are built on the same British model that Sri Lanka follows; hence training with similar militaries seems more practicable. In addition, even though Chinese training programmes are well-structured and rich in theory and concepts of fighting, Sri Lanka's officers face difficulties in following them due to a language barrier. While translations were provided, concerns over the loss of meaning during translations remained.<sup>1</sup>

In the recent years, China has been [improving](#) the training programmes to address different needs and challenges as well as expanding the reach out exponentially. The increase in Sri Lankan officers getting trained at China's National Defence University (Table 1) suggests Colombo too has benefitted.

**Table 1: Training Courses provided by China, 2012-2019**

Year	Training Courses Offered by China
2012	53
2013	53
2014	74
2015	200
2016	70
2017	96
2018	85

Source: Performance Reports, Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka (2012-2019)

<sup>1</sup> Author's conversation with major General Harendra Ranasinghe, General Officer Commanding of the 56 Division, Wanni Headquarters, Sri Lanka Army, 7 May 2021.

Undoubtedly, the Chinese military is among the most technologically advanced militaries in the world. Training with it facilitates Sri Lanka's military to gain experience and exposure to emerging technology and China's knowledge. In the meantime, the Chinese military benefits from Sri Lanka's experience of real-time combating experience, especially in asymmetric war.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the ongoing border tension between China and India, and New Delhi's active engagement in the Quad have changed the geopolitics in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region, signalling unavoidable militarisation. Against this backdrop, China is on a mission to establish military ties with India's neighbours like [Nepal](#) and [Bangladesh](#) and consolidate existing relations with Pakistan. Accordingly, apart from the geopolitical [significance](#), which has gained extensive attention,<sup>3</sup> General Wei's visit reflects China's interest in adding a military dimension to its growing ties with Sri Lanka.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Also see Pranay Sharma, "As China's defence minister heads for Sri Lanka, should India be worried?", *South China Morning Post*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3131163/chinas-defence-minister-heads-sri-lanka-should-india-be-worried>.