

## **Indo-Lanka Relations –Recent Trends**

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The signing of the Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in February 2002 would count as, by far, the most important overall development to have taken place in the past two decades in Sri Lanka. Likewise the role played by the Government of Norway in facilitating the peace process, and the rapid internationalisation of the peace process, would count as the most important foreign policy related development. In this paper I will approach the topic of "Indo - Lanka Relations: Recent Trends" through the prism of these two developments.

The Indian role in fostering the civil war in Sri Lanka is an unfortunate one. In the early 1980s India trained, armed and provided bases for Tamil militants to attack the Sri Lankan government forces. A former diplomat and political columnist K Godage has written that "Indian military strategists at that time, led by a strident Indira Gandhi, seem to have decided that Lanka was drifting away from India's sphere of influence and should be brought within the defence perimeter. The ethnic conflict in Lanka afforded India the opportunity to intervene." (K Godage, Historical Continuities, in "Securing South Asia", a Symposium on Advancing Peace in the Sub continent, September 2002).

Godage further says, "The destabilization of Sri Lanka was made easier by the attitude of the (Sri Lankan) government and Sinhala people who were not inclined to concede to the Tamil minority rights which they claimed for themselves. As the level of insurgency intensified, Indian not only gave refuge to Tamil militants, but helped them with arms, training and money. The magazine "India Today" in an article titled "Ominous Presence" filed by correspondent Shekhar Gupta identified the training camps and gave a detailed account of what the Indian authorities were doing to destabilize Lanka." (Ibid.)

J N Dixit who was ambassador to Sri Lanka at that critical time, and is presently foreign policy advisor to the Indian government has explained the Indian involvement in Sri Lanka in the following terms. “Tamil militancy received support both from Tamil Nadu and the Central Government not as a response to the Sri Lankan Government’s military assertiveness against its Tamils, but it was also a response to (Sri Lankan President) Jayewardene’s orchestrating military intelligence presence of the US, Israel and Pakistan in Sri Lanka. The assessment was that these presences would pose a strategic threat to India, as they might encourage fissiparous movements in the southern states of India”. (J N Dixit, Assignment Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Bookshop, Colombo, 1998. P. 329)

Clearly, the geo-political context within which India intervened in Sri Lanka was largely its concern over its security interests. As stated by Godage, “The Panikkar doctrine (named after K M Panikkar) emphasized the importance of the Indian Ocean for the defence of India. According to Panikkar, this vulnerability made it necessary for Lanka or Ceylon to become an integral part of India’s defence structure. The British had kept out other imperialist powers from the Indian Ocean to protect their interests. The perception was that India considered itself the successor to the British Raj and therefore sought to use the same principle to incorporate other states and keep external forces from the Sub Continent.” (Ibid.)

The continuing relevance of the Panikkar doctrine is also borne out in a commentary by V Suryanarayan, a professor and director of a research institute in India. He quotes a report in September 1997 by the Maritime Intelligence and Counter Piracy Operations Centre that Sri Lankan waters had become “extremely dangerous areas for maritime traffic.” He observed that “If effective steps are not taken, the LTTE will expand its geographic space as well as range of operations, posing a threat to South Asian security.” He also recommended that “New Delhi should develop the political will to pursue courses of action that promote India’s national interests. India should work with the objective of neutralizing the (LTTE) Sea Tigers at the earliest opportunity.” He concludes that “What Sardar K M Panikkar wrote in 1944 on the strategic significance of Burma applies very much to Indo-Sri Lanka security linkages today: ‘The defence of

Burma is in fact the defence of India and it is India's primary concern, no less than Burma's, to see that its frontiers remain inviolate." (V Suryanarayan, "Tigers Threat to Indian Security, The Island, July 31, 2004)

## THE CEASEFIRE

It is a truism that all wars must end one day. However, prior to the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement of February 2002 it seemed that Sri Lanka was doomed to an indeterminate and long term period of civil war. It was a war fought with escalating intensity and at tremendous cost to both sides. A few examples would suffice to give an indication of the costs of war. In the year that preceded the ceasefire the economy regressed by negative 1.4 percent, the first time ever in the post independence period.

The downturn in the economy followed an LTTE attack on Colombo's international airport that destroyed most of the country's civilian airfleet. Also in the previous year, in May 2000, the LTTE succeeded in overrunning the second largest military base in the Jaffna peninsula that was manned by about 8,000 soldiers. This attack brought the LTTE to the outskirts of Jaffna city, the main northern city.

In this context of rapidly escalating costs, the stopping of the war through the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement came as a major and welcome surprise. But the compromises entailed on the side of the Sri Lankan government were correspondingly high. Some of them would be the explicit acknowledgment that a significant part of Sri Lankan territory had fallen under the rule of the LTTE, and the role given to the Norwegian facilitators to give rulings on the lines of control between the two sides.

As a part of its counter strategy to negate these compromises which could jeopardise Sri Lanka's security and sovereignty the government has sought to canvass an international safety net for itself. India was a primary focus in the Sri Lankan government's search for international allies. The Sri Lankan prime minister's first visit abroad after signing the Ceasefire Agreement was to India, where he met with his counterpart. Subsequently also the prime minister, as well as the top ministers involved in the peace process, paid several more visits to India.

During that period the government-controlled media editorialised on the importance of Indo-Lanka ties in facilitating a solution to the ethnic conflict. An editorial written four months after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement stated, “Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s current visit to India, his second to that country in the past six months, freshly underscores India’s continuing importance to the Lankan peace process.” But even in that tribute to India there was an uneasy undertone. “India has continuously pledged its support for a negotiated and just political settlement in Lanka’s conflict and it is unlikely to deviate from this position. However it would be appropriate to inform India about the rationale behind our major moves, lest our intentions be misunderstood.” (Editorial, Daily News, June 11, 2002)

#### AMBIVALENCE

However, despite these and other Sri Lankan efforts to woo India into being supportive of the peace process, Indian ambivalence towards it has been marked. While India has issued several messages of support for the peace process, the Indian government has shown no interest in getting directly involved in the peace process. For instance India declined to play a major role in the Tokyo donor conference of June 2003, attended by over 40 countries and 40 other international agencies, at which Norway, Japan, the United States and the European Union were appointed as co-chairs.

Today, with Sri Lanka’s peace process stalled after the election of a new government in April 2004, there is much speculation about the Indian role. The new government has sections within it who have advocated that India should replace Norway as the facilitator. There is a strong belief that India is behind these moves. “The JVP’s continuing protests against many aspects of the peace process using several front organisations and acting as an opposition within the government is suspected by many as manipulations of India.” (Kesara Abeywardena, “Embattled government in war talk”. Daily Mirror, August 28, 2004)

The roots of Indian ambivalence to involvement in Sri Lankan affairs can be traced back to the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987. The events that unfolded from this agreement had tragic consequences to both countries. What began as an Indian exercise in power mediation and problem solving diplomacy ended up in a new war, albeit one fought between the Indian army and LTTE. The Indian Peace Keeping Force was eventually asked to return by the Sri Lankan government with its mission incomplete. This was followed by the subsequent assassinations of both former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan president R Premadasa as a consequence.

After the ill fated Indo-Lanka Accord, the Indian attitude towards the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict has been a hands-off one in terms of the public sphere. India has restricted itself to the issuing of statements of concern about Sri Lanka's territorial integrity and the protection of the rights of all communities. These statements have been generally welcomed by the Sri Lankan government and anti-LTTE groups. But there has been no direct Indian intervention even when such intervention has been requested by the Sri Lankan government.

“Since the Indian military intervention in 1987, Sri Lanka has been bending over backwards to please New Delhi with regard to the battle against terrorism, foreign policy and defence. Friendship with India has been a cornerstone of our foreign policy, it being held that antagonising India was the main cause for the events of 1987. While India’s hostile attitude towards this country has changed very much for the better from what it was in the eighties, and there is constant repetition that India ‘supports the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka’, in tangible form regrettably Indian support has not amounted to very much.” (Editorial, The Island, June 11, 2002)

The most outstanding example was the appeal made by the Sri Lankan government to India in May 2001 when an LTTE military offensive brought them to the verge of capturing the northern capital of Jaffna. The Indian response was to offer humanitarian assistance in the form of an evacuation of the Sri Lankan army from Jaffna if the need arose. However, this desperate situation did not arise. The Sri Lankan military was

able to halt the LTTE offensive, and even partially reverse it, with new weaponry hastily airlifted from Pakistan and the Czech Republic.

A lesson to be gleaned from the experience in May 2001 is that India is not prepared to directly intervene in Sri Lanka in a situation of military conflict. If Jaffna had fallen to the LTTE it would have been in possession of a most important political asset in its campaign for a separate state. However, most analysts continue to believe that India is a bulwark against Tamil separatism. This is on account of India's concern that a successful secessionist movement in Sri Lanka could strengthen similar disintegrative tendencies in India. It is also certainly reasonable to believe that India would not be happy to have a neighbouring state that is headed by those who assassinated one of its prime ministers.

The problem for India is that its past experience in Sri Lanka, and in particular its antagonistic relationship with the LTTE, has made it difficult to directly participate in the peace process. As currently structured, the peace process is about legitimising the military gains of the LTTE and also legitimising the LTTE as a political actor. India's extradition request to Sri Lanka regarding the LTTE leadership, and its ban on the LTTE imposed following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, pose insurmountable obstacles to any role that India could play as a third party in such a peace process.

#### NEW PHASE

The problem for Sri Lanka, however, is that India's inability to participate in the peace process had led to an estrangement of India from the peace process and to concerns that India can actually be a powerful spoiler of the entire process. A glimpse of this problem was seen when a question was asked on the floor of the Indian parliament a short while after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in Sri Lanka. The question was whether the extradition request to Sri Lanka still stood, and the answer given by the Indian government was that it did. This incident was seen in Sri Lanka as a deliberate Indian move to put the LTTE on notice that the international recognition it was receiving through the peace process would not change certain basic realities.

India has also shown its unhappiness with the growing internationalisation of the Sri Lankan peace process. The letters exchanged between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President J R Jayewardene of Sri Lanka in July 1987 as an adjunct of the Indo Lanka Peace Accord summarised Indian concerns about Sri Lanka's foreign policy at that time. They stated that "both Sri Lanka and India reaffirm the decision not to allow our respective territories to be used for activities prejudicial to each other's unity, territorial integrity and security." Other clauses stated that "Trincomalee or any other ports in Sri Lanka will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests" and that " Sri Lanka's agreements with foreign broadcasting organisations will be reviewed to ensure that any facilities set up by them in Sri Lanka are used solely as public broadcasting facilities and not for any military or intelligence purposes." (Dixit, pp. 360-1)

Although much has changed in the realm of international relations since the signing of the Indo Lanka Peace Accord, and India's global relationship with the United States has been transformed, it can be believed that India's concerns about geopolitical matters in its neighbourhood remains, even if to a lesser degree. For instance, India declined to participate in two recent US-led military exercises in Sri Lanka in which several other countries, including Nepal, also participated.

Although both the Sri Lankan and Norwegian governments have taken public pains to keep India briefed on developments in the peace process, there has been a cosmetic element to them. India has been unable to prevent the internationalisation of Sri Lanka's peace process. What started as an exclusive Norwegian initiative in 2000 has now grown into a process that officially includes Japan, the United States and the European Union.

These three international actors, all three of them global superpowers, now have a continuing role as co-chairs of the Tokyo donor conference that set benchmarks for the peace process and which pledged a massive total of USD 4.5 billion for four years. Indian unhappiness at Japan's political and economic role in the peace process has been

reported in the media. The challenge for Sri Lanka is to assuage India's security and geopolitical concerns even as it strives to harness international assistance to resolve its ethnic conflict and develop its economy. There is a need to ensure transparency in Sri Lanka's dealings with foreign powers and ensure a peace process in which there is constant consultation with India.

There are some important reasons why India would wish to play a bigger role in the Sri Lankan peace process. The first would be to reaffirm India's diplomatic dominance over the South Asian region. The active diplomatic role being played by Norway in the Sri Lankan peace process could signal an increased international role in intervening in conflict resolution processes in South Asia as a whole. In fact due to continuing Indo-Pakistan tensions over the Kashmir issue, the United States has tried to play a conflict resolution role between the two countries.

It would be in India's longer term interest in obtaining for itself a positive role in the Sri Lankan peace process. However, in a great deal more of diplomatic and tripartite relationship building will be necessary before India can get itself involved in a direct manner again. Therefore in the present phase of the peace process, it is likely that Norway will continue to play the lead third party role. It is at a subsequent phase that India may wish to play a more leading role.

Of all the world's leading powers it is India that has the greatest direct interest in Sri Lanka. Keeping out the world's big powers from the South Asian region would be only one of its interests. Another would be in respect of the final settlement arrived at in Sri Lanka. There is no doubt that what happens in Sri Lanka will be closely studied by those who wish to forge a new polity in India itself. The peace settlement in Sri Lanka, and the new parameters of the constitutional arrangement, could become proposed as a model for India itself, or for some of its internal conflicts.