



## India and Sri Lanka

### Continuing Innings, Constructive Engagement

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With the 'ethnic war' behind it and the elections to the presidency conclusive proving the continuing dominance of President Mahinda Rajapaksa on the political arena in Sri Lanka, India is poised to re-engage Colombo.

It's a coincidence that both India and Sri Lanka went to the polls around the same time – both influenced as they were by the fallout of the conclusion of the ethnic war. Ironically, the electoral relevance of the war and the violent end of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was more relevant and immediate to the parliamentary polls in India rather than in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka voted a leader with a mission – and a possible vision for the future – compared to a political novice, backed by the political Opposition that was discredited for long and disjointed until the other day. Earlier in May 2009, when the ethnic war was its very peak, India went through the parliamentary polls. The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) ally of the Congress in Tamil Nadu retained its position at the Centre.

All these are relatively less important today. However, a reversal in the election results in India might have impacted on bilateral relations with Sri Lanka, viewed in the context of the high-pitched political promises made by the Opposition in Tamil Nadu, on New Delhi's post-poll positions on the ethnic issue, war and violence. Whether any new Government in New Delhi would have had the luxury of required time on its hand to rewrite the unfolding scenario on the war front, punctuated occasionally by Indian intent and/or Sri Lankan content, is beside the point, now. Yet, in the context of the emerging future, continuity would help, particularly on the political front. Already, institutional mechanisms exist in the two capitals to re-jig bilateral relations to mutual benefit in the changed circumstances nearer home and emerging global environment

#### I ETHNIC ISSUE: THE WAY AHEAD

There will be more visible change in the coming

years and decades in India-Sri Lanka relations as they readjust themselves to the emerging reality of a region without LTTE presence. The larger 'Tamil issue' going beyond the cause that the LTTE as also moderate sections of the Tamil public opinion and polity in Sri Lanka had flagged and fought for over decades would have to be studied whether any residual issue left behind by the LTTE could grow in proportions in the coming years. Much will depend on how the Sri Lankan Government and the Sinhala polity intends taking on the political demands and challenges thrown up by the exit of the LTTE. It is not as if the Sri Lankan Government should be willing to offer whatever the Tamil polity in the country demanded. It would also depend on the kind of Tamil political leadership (read: credible negotiators) likely to emerge now. The upcoming parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, in April 2010, should shape this. The local civil society and also the international community would feel confident if that a future Tamil political leadership in Sri Lanka has the inherent capabilities to relate to the ground situation and work out a political package that they are capable of implementing without hitches or let-up.

India as the next-door neighbour deeply involved in the Sri Lankan issue would often be called upon to test bilateral relations on an acceptable solution. It would be more so at policy-levels than at the political levels, where domestic interest in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka is already waning. LTTE's demise and the delays within Sri Lanka to rework their own relations in context would confer on New Delhi greater moral responsibility. India would go back to the days of the pre-Eelam Wars when it had all the responsibility on finding a political solution without the attendant authority; and to speak for the Tamil-speaking people, bordering on liability. India would not covet such a situation; but if the 'ethnic issue' in Sri Lanka becomes a 'global Tamil issue', it could impact on India.

The continuing engagement of a section within the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora would be an important factor that neither country can overlook. The umbilical cord bondage has encouraged the Tamil-speaking people – whether in Sri Lanka or

elsewhere in the world – to expect contemporary Governments in New Delhi and Chennai to stand by them. New Delhi is unable to help the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil polity there to find an amicable political solution and has it implemented on the ground. The consequent pressures of this on bilateral relations between the two countries would revive and remain if they are unable to convert the opportunities provided by their coordinated efforts in ending the LTTE menace is not taken to its logical and acceptable conclusion.

## II STRATEGIC ISSUES

Independent of ethnic issue, emerging geo-political reality relating to the shared waters of the Indian Ocean neighbourhood involving India and Sri Lanka is also an important strategic concern for New Delhi. The projected emergence of China as a global military/maritime power on par with the US in the existing uni-polar world has been an issue of great concern to sections of the strategic community in India. The near-simultaneous global attention on securing the energy sea-lanes from the oil-rich Gulf region to the rest of the world has created greater awareness about the need for nations in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood to work together. The end-game in the ethnic war showed how Sri Lanka is militarily and tactically equipped to terrorist-situations of the kind that the LTTE posed, both in the adjoining seas and on land.

The underlying cooperation from India helped more than the aid and assistance that Sri Lanka obtained from any other country helped the nation neutralise the LTTE. Indian inputs and cooperation to Sri Lanka could not have been matched by another nation, nor could they have been replaced. New Delhi also helped Colombo at various UN forums during Eelam War IV. There is thus a greater appreciation in Colombo about the silent support that New Delhi offered throughout Eelam War IV without India being called upon to offend its long-held sensitivities to supplying offensive weapons to a third nation, or the sensibilities of the Tamil-speaking population in its midst.

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There is a continuing concern in the Indian strategic community about the increasing involvement of China in Sri Lanka. Reference is often made to the China setting up a port and bunkering facility in Hambantotta. Beijing has also funded a coal-fired thermal power project in Norchcholai in western Sri Lanka. Chinese funding has been flowing enormously into the reconstruction and developmental projects envisaged by Sri Lanka in a big way. The work on most of these projects is also being completed at a break-neck speed, which Sri Lankans and Indians are not accustomed. Against this, Indian funding for developmental works in Sri Lanka have been tardy. Though efforts are reportedly on India to look into the loopholes in the existing system, there will be continuing hesitation in Sri Lanka for approaching India with their shopping-list, leave alone their imaginative wish-list(s), until there is visible progress.

New Delhi does understand the inherent impediments and is alive to the reality that Beijing has huge stocks of disposable funds available for injection into reconstruction and developmental projects across the world. The global recession, from which China benefited in terms of economic/fiscal tactic against the West, has come as a developmental boon for Third World nations. Though India remain protected to a great extent, it did not translate automatically into flush funds for investments and development in its neighbourhood. Nor is India an autocratic State, like China, where the Government can isolate developmental funding to select urban centres, continuing the vast rural backyard and their larger population in the dark. The demands of democracy dictate that New Delhi addresses domestic demands for developmental funding, economic activity and jobs-creations before rushing to the aid of neighbours in near-similar or worse-off situations. Simply put, New Delhi is not in a league with China. Not even the US is, at the moment.

Despite the above, today, New Delhi is equipped to understand and appreciate the nuance-centric relationship that Sri Lanka is seeking to develop with India on the one hand and China on the other. There is also considerable appreciation about the sovereign right of Sri Lanka to choose its friends and allies and even emerging appreciation about Sri Lanka's need and urgency for hurrying post-war development, and the consequent Indian limitations in the matter.

Yet, the China-centric concerns in certain sections of the Indian strategic community are real, whatever be the logic and strength of their argument. While existing institutional mechanisms in the two nations may have in-built measures to ensure that they chart out the right course(s) vis a vis the other, this cannot be said about the consultation mechanisms and information-sharing processes that are required to erase, first from the logbook and then from residual memory, the

distaste from the past. It is not as if politico-administrative India is unaware of its limitations in meeting all the developmental and investment demands of a country like Sri Lanka – or, Nepal for that matter – poised as they are to break out from the war-ravaged past into a booming economy that could put back those nations in league with the best possible growth-rates elsewhere in the world and also the South Asian region. Nearer home, India's is a standing example, not only worthy of inspiration but also emulation.

### III

#### E-DIPLOMACY: EDUCATION AND ECONOMY

Independent of the inputs that India could provide, credit should go to Rajapaksa to identify areas of deficiency in Sri Lanka's national growth-curve and moving ahead with early efforts to fill the gaps even when the ethnic war was still on. 'Rajapaksa model', focuses on all-round reconstruction and rehabilitation (of industries as much as individuals) for strengthening the post-poll peace process as much as ushering in the promised growth. This has not stopped with the manufacturing sector, for which there is limited scope in the country. Like India, Sri Lanka too has identified the 'services sector' for fuelling economic growth over time and independent of the post-war reconstruction efforts. The idea seems to be equip the nation's population, particularly the younger generation, to be prepared for taking up tasks and jobs that would come their way, as and when the 'services sector' grows to match the post-war reconstruction that are being planned.

Sri Lanka has the highest literacy rate in South Asia. But it is low and slow in continuing with this model at higher levels of education, particularly in 'professional fields' such as engineering and medicine. Given the limited number of jobs that the country's existing infrastructure can create, the dependence on the State sector is exponentially high, with political benefits for the ruling class and economic burden for the nation. The low-level of education also means that the highly-competent Sri Lankans end up getting only low-end, low-paying jobs in overseas markets where their talent is otherwise respected and may be sought-after. In contrast, India, particularly those in the South, have a model of its population growing with the growth. The nation in general, and particular States such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, was ready to meet the demands of the changing economy, they having built their intellectual infrastructure base on the 'socialist model' and yet being open to adopting the tools of market economy like competitive higher education standards, that have been the source of high-paying, high-end jobs for ordinary Indians with adequate educational exposure and qualification.

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To meet the short-term exigencies in the short-term, the Rajapaksa administration initiated programmes on English-teaching and e-learning even in the midst of the ethnic war in the President's first term. The project is yet to take off in a big way. As part of the process, Indian experts are engaged in equipping Sri Lanka's language teachers in 'spoken English', which is seen as an area of deficiency. Yet, on the larger arena of educating and equipping average Sri Lankans, whether Tamil-speaking or Sinhalas, the gap is huge. India, for instance, has the expertise, experience and equipment to modernise the existing system in Sri Lanka, in ways that could produce the required and desired results in time for the re-built nation to reap the benefits, when ready. Both nations need to take up these steps as much as a mutually-conducive diplomatic effort as aimed at improving educational standards in one country with equipment provided by the other.

Even otherwise, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the two countries has been on the anvil for quite some time, the hands of the Sri Lankan Government being tied by contradictions and confusions from the domestic trade and industry after the two nations had initialled a MoU in 2009. It was only slightly better in the case of India, where again differences still exist over the 'Negative List'. Learning from past experience with regard to the FTA that they signed in the Nineties, there is considerable hope in the two capitals still about the need and desirability for going ahead with the CEPA. On the political front, both Governments are now on a stronger footing than a year ago, and the early signing of the CEPA after carrying the respective domestic industries would not only strengthen bilateral economic relations but would also go a long way in the possible realisation of even multilateral concepts such as a the 'common South Asian currency', about which President Rajapaksa has been talking about at every available opportunity. Together with improved opportunities and commitments on larger Indian investments in Sri Lanka, both in the public sector and the private, the expansion of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for member-nations under the UNCLOS (United Nations

Convention on the Laws of the Sea) in the coming decades, provides as much opportunities for India and Sri Lanka to take their shared economic growth and security cooperation to new heights. Any immediate cooperation in the varied sectors of e-cooperation, be it on the economic front or education front, for instance, would be paving the way for sustainable and greater benefits for both in the years and decades to come.

### III THE ROAD AHEAD

Geography has made India and Sri Lanka close neighbours. The sea that divides other nations connects them, instead. Their shared history is replete with instances of migration from one country to the other, particularly from the Indian side. Various Tamil-speaking communities variously claim Indian parentage. Sinhala-Buddhism, both as a religion and language, has a recorded history of Indian origins. Despite the global recession that hit air travel across the world, air travel between Colombo and destinations in India continues to be over-booked and affordable.

With the war behind Sri Lanka, the two nations are already working towards reviving the forgotten ferry service, and also the 'Boat Mail' train service, which in the pre-Independence era connected the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo to Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Already, there are talks of promoting rail tourism based out of Chennai, linking various Buddhist pilgrim centres in India, with the Sri Lankan tourists in mind. With technology and funding now available, a 'land bridge' with a rail-track also across the Palk Strait could open up not only India but the whole of the Eurasian landmass to Sri Lanka – and its idyllic insularity would then become a thing of the past.

On the political front, the visit of a 10-member Indian parliamentary team from Tamil Nadu, to visit the IDP camps in the war-ravaged Tamil-majority Northern Province in Sri Lanka in recent months was the first of its kind in decades. Despite decades of engagement through the 60-plus years of Independence from the common British colonial ruler, there has been no record of any academic interest between the political class in the two countries to study, know and understand one another, even in the backdrop of the continuing contours of the ethnic issue.

Whatever bilateral visits that did not involve politicians in power were exercises aimed at articulating pre-determined ideas to a pre-judgemental audience. They were not about understanding one another, either as a people or as polity. Barring peripheral sections that are vocal nonetheless, the goodwill for India among the majority sections in Sri Lanka's political class is excellent and also cuts across the ethnic divide. The same cannot be said about the Sri Lanka in India, though peripheral views from Tamil Nadu

should not be taken as the yardstick. The defeat of all-embracing LTTE terrorism in the southern neighbourhood has earned for Sri Lanka a certain respect across the country that cannot be quantified.

Yet, concerns about a political solution, though not fully understood, also remain. It is hoped that visits of the kind involving the Tamil Nadu MPs from both sides would pave the way for greater exchange of political views and ideas between the two nations, starting with Tamil Nadu on the Indian side but not confined to the State. Such a course, along with other initiatives, would help create local constituencies in each country for the other – not because of anything else other than a better understanding of issues and priorities at all levels of the society and government. The initiative for the same rests with the two Governments, particularly with New Delhi but Colombo too needs to do its best.

India is already being acknowledged as a regional power in its own right, and a global power in the making. History is replete with instances of intended global powers carrying the immediate neighbourhood before launching past them. The US, through accommodation, and the erstwhile Soviet Union, through military might, did precisely that. While the former succeeded, the latter failed miserably. In the context of emerging relations between India and Sri Lanka, New Delhi is often said to have over-shot immediate neighbours for a place on the larger table, elsewhere, especially in the years after the end of the 'Cold War'. The Indian approach needs to be seen in perspective. Having extended its reach through the past decade, India now seems to have returned to the base, to build a brick by brick relation with immediate neighbours, at the level of the government and also their peoples.

With Indian Ocean holding an eternal promise for the future, from the days of the 'Cold War', if not earlier, there is no way India could have hoped to become a super-power and retain the tag without carrying the Sri Lankan neighbour with it. The reverse is true of Sri Lanka, which is now hoping to revive the economic glory of the earlier decades, when it was seen as a model for an emerging Singapore to emulate but which could fast-track its progress in the absence of any 'ethnic divide' of the Sri Lankan kind

*Views expressed are author's own.*



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