

## India's Strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia: Implications for Sri Lanka's National Security

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**Abstract**— As a result of the steady growth of the Indian economy vast financial resources have accrued to the Indian government. The Indian government is using these financial resources to pursue a very ambitious strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. Regional stability and cooperation play a very important role in India's strategy and in the Indian and South Asia. In pursuing an ambitious strategy in the above mentioned regions India would do well to pay attention to its closest maritime neighbour, Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka occupies a central and geopolitically significant location in the Indian Ocean and is an important country in the southern part of South Asia. This paper will focus on the content of India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, and the implications of India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia for Sri Lanka's national security.

This paper will examine challenges and opportunities faced by the India-Sri Lanka relationship. These opportunities and challenges concern the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka, the large scale poaching by fishermen from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Sri Lankan waters and the China factor. In order to examine these issues the paper will first look at India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, second it will move onto a consideration of Sri Lanka's national security, and third it will attempt to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by India-Sri Lanka relationship.

**Key Words**- India-Sri Lanka Relations, Strategy, National Security

### I. INTRODUCTION

It would be pertinent to remember that even at the time of the inception of the Republic of India in the mid-twentieth century under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru India had the strategic vision to play a major role in Asian and even world affairs. During the Cold War it was a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However an extremely slow economic growth rate held India back for many years. After the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s India's growth rate began to pick up. While domestic economic development will remain one of India's main strategic objectives in the twenty first century, the

financial resources that have accrued to the state as a result of consistent healthy annual growth rates will enable India to pursue its strategic vision in the international arena with greater vigour. Currently India is in contention to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and it is an important participant in a large number of regional cooperation initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Indian Navy (IN) is planning to play an ever greater role in the Indian Ocean with a steady acquisition of air, surface and sub-surface assets. India envisions itself as playing a leading role in regional and perhaps even global strategic stability. In pursuing such an ambitious strategy it would be prudent of India to give due importance to its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia and to its closest maritime neighbour Sri Lanka.

It is against this backdrop that this paper will examine challenges and opportunities facing the India-Sri Lanka relationship. These opportunities and challenges will concern the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka, the large scale illegal fishing by fishermen from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Sri Lankan waters and the China factor. In order to examine these issues the paper will first look at India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, second it will move onto a consideration of Sri Lanka's national security, and third it will attempt to identify the challenges and opportunities that India faces in its relationship with Sri Lanka.

### II. INDIA'S STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND SOUTH ASIA

India's strategy in the Indian Ocean can be derived from *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* and *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* produced by Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy) in 2007 and 2015 respectively (Ministry of Defence, India 2007; Ministry of Defence, India 2015). According to the foreword to the 2007 maritime strategy document by

Adm. Sureesh Mehta, who was at the time Chief of Naval Staff, Indian Navy, India's primary national interest is to ensure a secure and stable strategic environment to ensure continued economic development in order to improve the living conditions of its masses. Its primary maritime military interest is to safeguard national security and prevent external interference so that national economic growth and development can take place in a secure environment. According to Adm. Mehta India's maritime military strategy will be underpinned by the principle "freedom to use the seas for national purposes under all circumstances" (Ministry of Defence, India 2007). In his foreword to this document Adm. Mehta goes on to state the following:

The Indian Navy is the primary maritime means by which the state ensures the use of the sea for its own purposes, while at the same time ensuring that others do not use it in a manner prejudicial to its interests. The Indian Navy, by virtue of its capability, strategic positioning and robust presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), can be the catalyst for peace, tranquility and stability in the IOR. It can be used to engage other maritime nations and to extend our hand of friendship and cooperation. Also, it can act as a strong deterrent to prevent conflict, or to respond, should it become inevitable (Ministry of Defence, India 2007).

According to the same document in its immediate neighbourhood India has accorded the highest priority to closer ties with South Asian countries. To quote the document, "India has a vision of South Asia, unshackled from historical divisions and bound together in collective pursuit of peace, and prosperity". India thinks the SAARC process can facilitate economic linkages through initiatives such as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) (Ministry of Defence, India 2007). On China the position of this document is mixed. On one hand it states that "there is a strong national consensus on improving and developing relations with China". On other hand it also shows a wariness of China's "attempts to gain a strategic toe-hold in the IOR" (Ministry of Defence, India 2007). In the section on 'Strategy for Employment in Peace' one of the roles envisioned for the Indian Navy and Coast Guard is a constabulary role. Constabulary operations the Indian Navy has engaged in include anti-poaching, anti-smuggling, anti-piracy and coastal security. Since the establishment of the Indian Coast Guard in 1978 most of the law enforcement functions of the constabulary role have been transferred to it (Ministry of Defence, India 2007). With regard to constabulary operations understandably the emphasis in the document is on acting against illegal activities in the Maritime Zones of

India (MZI) and taking action against threats to India. However, as stated in the document, if India is genuinely committed to regional stability and cooperation, India should also be concerned about poaching in the waters of other countries by Indian fishermen. Therefore it can be argued that enforcement of maritime border security with regard to fishing vessels going out of Indian waters into the waters of another country should also be regarded as a constabulary role by the Indian Coast Guard.

In the 2015 Indian maritime strategy document, chapter three on 'Strategy for Deterrence', chapter five on 'Strategy for Shaping a Favourable and Positive Maritime Environment', and chapter six on 'Strategy for Coastal and Offshore Security' all mention 'good order at sea' as an objective of the constabulary role of Indian maritime forces (Ministry of Defence, India 2015). According to the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Memorandum 5, one indication of the breakdown in 'good order at sea' is illegal fishing (CSCAP 2001). Because maintaining 'good order at sea' is an objective of the constabulary role of Indian maritime forces, India must be concerned about Indian fishermen engaging in illegal fishing in the waters of other countries.

In 2012, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), an autonomous institute funded by the Ministry of Defence, India, published a book entitled *Grand Strategy for India: 2020 and Beyond* (Venkatshamy and George 2012). This book contains a chapter by Dr. Arvind Gupta, then Director-General, IDSA, and currently India's Deputy National Security Advisor, on the role of South Asia in India's national security strategy. In this chapter Dr. Gupta proposes the following as content for an Indian national security strategy document:

India shares a common cultural and security space with the countries in the South Asian region. As a prominent Asian nation with critical national interests in South Asia, India has special responsibility to ensure peace and stability in the region. India will work towards this end by cooperating with countries in the region....India believes that South Asian countries are capable of dealing with their problems without the involvement of external powers...India attaches great importance to its relations with China. It believes that both countries have enough room to develop...It will seek to expand the area of cooperation in all spheres [with China] including in the field of security (Gupta 2012).

However it is important to note that earlier in the same chapter as part of his analysis Dr. Gupta argues that the India-China rivalry could sharpen in the future and that it will play itself out in the Indian Ocean Region. He calls on India to devise a strategy for dealing with China which according to him has the ambition to play a dominant role in South Asia. With regard to Sri Lanka Dr. Gupta's analysis points out that the most important stumbling block in the India-Sri Lanka relationship is the Tamil issue and that apart from that India is also concerned about Sri Lanka's relations with China (Gupta 2012). Based on Dr. Gupta's analysis and proposals the following observations can be made about India's strategic vision in South Asia. First, cooperation with the other South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, could play an important role in India's national security strategy. Second, regional stability could be an important objective of India's national security strategy because it affects the security environment that India will have to deal with. Regional stability in South Asia would surely involve the territorial integrity of both India and other countries in the region, including Sri Lanka. Third, while India will cooperate with China it will try to limit the latter's role in South Asian regional issues. This does not preclude other South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka from cooperating with China but it does entail that they should be cautious about drawing China into South Asian regional issues.

### III. SRI LANKA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

For many years the separatist armed struggle waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) posed the most grave threat to Sri Lanka's national security. In May 2009 Sri Lanka comprehensively defeated the LTTE militarily, one of the most feared terrorist organizations in the world. For approximately thirty years the LTTE posed a separatist threat to the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and a threat to the safety of its civilian population. Many in Sri Lanka think that the military defeat of the LTTE will enable Sri Lanka to proceed with its quest for economic development unfettered by a debilitating separatist conflict. However, even though the LTTE was comprehensively defeated militarily in 2009 the separatist threat to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity is far from over. This is because pro-LTTE groups among sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora continue to support the separatist cause. While some of these pro-LTTE diaspora groups support the continuation of the violent struggle pursued by the LTTE others support the pursuit of the separatist struggle through non-violent means such as political advocacy in the international arena. While Sri Lanka will have to remain vigilant at home, a large part of

Sri Lanka's effort to counter the continuing separatist threat will have to take place in the international arena.

For the last twenty years or so India has been consistent in its support for Sri Lanka's territorial integrity. This commitment has been reiterated by Indian political leaders, officials and scholars countless times in recent years. While in this period Sri Lanka has had a very good relationship with the Indian central government, relations with Tamil Nadu, the Indian state that shares a maritime border with Sri Lanka, have faced difficulties. Currently a pressing problem that Sri Lanka is faced with is the breaching of the security of the maritime border in large numbers by Tamil Nadu fishermen who engage in illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters. The nature of Indian coalition politics is such that whenever the two main Indian national political parties the Congress and the BJP are weak at the centre, regional Tamil Nadu political parties such as Karunanidhi's DMK or Jayalalitha's AIDMK can exert a substantial influence on India's Sri Lanka policy. While Sri Lankan political leaders, officials and scholars are well aware of the geopolitical imperative of maintaining a close understanding and relationship with India, memories of India's support for Tamil militant groups in the early- to mid-1980s are deep seated. These memories tend to introduce an element of mistrust into Sri Lanka's relations with India. Memories of the past tend to introduce an undercurrent of mistrust into a relationship which both countries are keen on nurturing. The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE turned India against the LTTE and for the last twenty years or so Sri Lanka and India have done their best to put the troubled past behind them. They succeeded to such an extent that in the mid-2000s India and Sri Lanka were discussing a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA). The last time the DCA was broached was when then India's Chief of Army Staff visited Sri Lanka in December 2012.

Sri Lanka's contemporary national security concerns have been well articulated by then Secretary of Defence Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa in a speech given at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU), Sri Lanka in June 2013 (Rajapaksa 2013). The number one national security concern for Sri Lanka identified by Mr. Rajapaksa was 'the possible reemergence of terrorism'. In the speech he traces the source of this threat to four pro-LTTE factions active in the international arena. These are the Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC) which advocates the continuation of Prabhakaran's violent struggle, the Transnational Government of Tamil Elam (TGTE) and the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) which advocate the pursuit of the separatist

effort through non-violent means such as political advocacy in the international arena, and the LTTE Headquarters Group (LTTEHG) which engages in illegal activities such as human smuggling. In the former Defence Secretary Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's words:

All of the LTTE-linked groups are coordinated by the GTF and united by one overarching objective. Their unwavering intent is the division of Sri Lanka and the establishment of a separate state for Tamil Eelam (Rajapaksa 2013). The new government that came into office in Sri Lanka in 2015 has established a dialogue with the GTF with the objective of obtaining the support of the Tamil diaspora for the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. The new government is surely engaging in dialogue with the GTF with the understanding that the GTF is committed to Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity.

Another important national security concern identified by Mr. Rajapaksa is 'the creation of ethnic divisions and communal violence'. An important point to note about this concern which has a bearing on India is the tendency for some members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community to identify with the Tamil community of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu rather with their fellow Sri Lankans. This cross-border link facilitates the interference of Tamil Nadu politicians in India's Sri Lanka policy whenever Indian coalition politics enables them to obtain substantial leverage at the level of the Indian central government. In Mr. Rajapaksa's view one of the ways to deal with this concern is the "forging of a common Sri Lankan identity". The implication is that if there is a strong Sri Lankan identity all members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community would identify more with their fellow Sri Lankans than with the Tamil community of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The 'challenges of maritime security and border control' have also been identified by Mr. Rajapaksa as an important national security concern for Sri Lanka. Poaching by south Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters is seen in this context. Mr. Rajapaksa considers maintaining good relations with all the major powers, including India and China, as important for safeguarding Sri Lanka's national security (Rajapaksa 2013). While the military defeat of the LTTE has enabled Sri Lanka to broaden its approach to national security Sri Lanka has to remain vigilant about the continuing separatist threat. Sri Lanka must rely ultimately on itself for safeguarding its national security, however the right kind of international cooperation of that between sovereign states, particularly with India, can help Sri Lanka to do this.

### III. INDIA-SRI LANKA RELATIONSHIP: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

This section will elaborate on the challenges and opportunities India is facing in its relationship with Sri Lanka. It will look at challenges and opportunities for India with regard to three issues: the persistence of the separatist threat to Sri Lanka, poaching by Tamil Nadu fishermen in Sri Lankan waters, and the China factor. All three issues will remain matters of concern at least for the next few years.

With regard to the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka the key challenge India will face is the influence the LTTE-linked Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora may try to exert on it through Tamil Nadu politicians. The exertion of such an influence would be extremely detrimental to the India-Sri Lanka relationship. On this issue India will have to insulate its Sri Lanka policy from the influence of Tamil Nadu politicians. The key opportunity India will face with regard to this issue is to assist Sri Lanka in its effort maintain its territorial integrity. India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia is clearly committed to regional stability and this would surely involve the maintenance of the territorial integrity of countries in the region.

On the issue of poaching by Tamil Nadu fishermen in Sri Lankan waters the key challenge India will face is that of enforcing maritime border security on Indian fishing vessels going out into Sri Lankan waters. The constabulary role of the Indian Coast Guard could be expanded to include this task. There is a great deal of concern about this issue in Sri Lanka because it is a threat to the security of Sri Lanka's maritime border, fisheries industry and the livelihoods of northern Sri Lankan fishermen. The key opportunity India will face with regard to this issue is to cooperate with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard in enforcing maritime border security and maintaining good order at sea. From Sri Lanka's point of view such a step would be most welcome and it would also be consistent with the emphasis on cooperation to be found in India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. Such cooperation between the Indian and Sri Lankan navies and coastguards could take the form of joint or coordinated maritime border patrols and monitoring.

The China factor will have an important bearing on the India-Sri Lanka relationship. Sri Lanka's relationship with China has traditionally been a strong one. China is both a major trade partner and investor in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has maintained a strong relationship with China for much of its independent history. Having said that, there is a realization in Sri Lanka that it had become too dependent on China in the last few

years. Therefore Sri Lanka is at present engaged in an effort to diversify its international relationships. The key challenge India will face with regard to the China factor in Sri Lanka is to come to terms with Sri Lanka's right to pursue an independent foreign policy as a sovereign independent country. Such an independent Sri Lankan foreign policy would involve the maintenance of sound relations with all major powers, including India and China, without becoming too dependent on any of them. The key opportunity India will face on this issue arises from the conviction among Sri Lankan political leaders, officials and scholars that Sri Lanka must reassure India about its links with China. As has already been asserted in this paper the maintenance of a close understanding and relationship with India is a geopolitical imperative for Sri Lanka. Most of Sri Lankan political leaders, officials and scholars are aware at least to some extent of the complex nature of the India-China relationship and they are committed to maintaining a close understanding with India regarding the China factor.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

India's contemporary strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia shows a strong commitment to regional stability and cooperation. Sri Lanka is significant for India as the latter's closest maritime neighbor. Sri Lanka's contemporary national security concerns include the possible re-emergence of terrorism and relatedly the continuing separatist threat emanating from the activities of LTTE-linked Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora groups in the international arena, the maintenance of ethnic and communal harmony and the forging of a common Sri Lankan identity, the maintenance of maritime security and border control, and forging of sound relations with all major powers.

The paper has considered challenges and opportunities India will face with Sri Lanka with regard to three issues: the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka, large scale poaching by fishermen from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Sri Lankan waters, and the China factor. On the first issue the challenge for India will be that of insulating its Sri Lanka policy from the influence of Tamil Nadu politicians, and the opportunity for India will be that of assisting Sri Lanka in its effort to maintain its territorial integrity. On the second issue the challenge for India will be that of enforcing maritime border security on Indian fishing vessels going into Sri Lankan waters, and the opportunity for India will be that of cooperating with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard in enforcing maritime border security. On the third issue the challenge for India will be that of coming to terms with Sri Lanka's right to an independent foreign policy which entails

maintaining sound relations with all major powers including China, and the opportunity for India is that of sustaining a close understanding with Sri Lanka on the China factor.

As India pursues an ambitious strategy in the Indian Ocean and South Asia it would do well to pay close attention to its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia and its closest maritime neighbour Sri Lanka. As has been repeatedly emphasized in this paper the sustenance of a close understanding and relationship with India is a geopolitical imperative for Sri Lanka. The political leadership, officials and scholars of both India and Sri Lanka will have to work together on overcoming the challenges and building on the opportunities mentioned in this paper.

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