

India - Sri Lanka Relations: Examining Domestic Factors and External Influences on State Behaviour

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Abstract—Bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and its northern neighbour- India- have traditionally been critical for both countries. The implication of such a close proximity is that, developments in each country have bearing on the other. Both India's and Sri Lanka's foreign policy assertiveness, fuelled by domestic dynamism and external influence, makes many believe that the above factors influence and drive their relationship. The "petty politics" in Tamil Nadu are inextricably entwined with the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. In addition to India's interest in South Asia as a regional power, the 'heavy weight' influence of Tamil Nadu over Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is generally considered a critical factor in India's bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. From Sri Lanka's perspective, the Tamil Nadu domestic politics have unduly influenced India's actions on Sri Lanka and on the Lankan Tamil issue in a critical manner.

In contrary, from the Indian viewpoint of Sri Lanka's external relations - particularly with China and Pakistan- are an important concern for India as the regional power in aligning its bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's geo-strategic location caused anxiety to Indian security because of the possibility of the involvement of external powers with Sri Lanka against India's strategic and security interests. New Delhi perceives that presence of any external powers in the Island nation can possibly pose a serious threat to the security of India as well as to regional stability.

The research problem of the study is to examine why domestic and external factors have had varied influence on the India - Sri Lanka bilateral relations. Understanding "why" will lead to determine the contours of the diplomatic and other responses required to maintain the relationship in a positive equilibrium. Also the study will focus on whether antipathy between two will aid in resolving their security concern and strategic interest in the region? The study will examine the working hypothesis that the major determinant affecting India - Sri

Lanka relations is the security and strategic compulsions of Colombo and New Delhi.

Keywords—Foreign Policy Assertiveness, External Power, State Behaviour

I. INTRODUCTION

India is Sri Lanka's closest neighbour with a population of 1.4 billion and a country with nearly fifty times the size of Sri Lanka and her influence in the fields of politics and other forms has shaped the political dynamics of Sri Lanka. The relationship between the two countries is more than 2,500 years old and both sides have built upon a strong and vital relationship in cultural, religious and linguistic spheres.

India and Sri Lanka got independence from British rulers in 1947 and 1948 respectively. India and Sri Lanka share common values and a governance system. Since independence both countries have followed a similar non aligned foreign policy during the time of cold war. There are many factors which influence the state behaviour of India and Sri Lanka in their bilateral relations. In contemporary dynamics, the politics of Tamil Nadu, which entwined with the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka is the most crucial domestic factor that manipulates the state behaviour towards each other in their relationship. The growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka is the most important external factor that is affecting each other's relations.

DOMESTIC FACTORS INFLUENCING STATE BEHAVIOUR

The complexities of domestic politics have played a significant role in deciding the direction of bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka. According to Sivarajah(1990) the nature of Tamil minority in Sri Lanka affects India's domestic politics as much as that of Sri Lanka's politics, because there are nearly seventy million Tamils in the state of Tamil Nadu in India who belong not only to the same ethnic stock as Tamils in Sri Lanka but also speak the same language and follow the same

cultural patterns. Whenever communal riots between the Sinhalese and the Tamils take place, the seventy million Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu press the government of India to take up the matter with Sri Lanka and to do something or redress the injustice done to their brethren in that country.

The seventy million Tamils living in Tamil Nadu are inseparably linked ethnically to the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Since the independence in 1948, Tamils in Sri Lanka had demanded from the Central government for devolution of powers to Tamils living in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Many Tamil political parties proposed a federal solution on ethnic basis to Tamil dominated North and East. The Sri Lankan government dominated by Sinhalese, mostly due to the fear of state separation was not able to reply positively to the demands of the Tamils. The successive governments ignoring the Tamil demand led to us vs. them debate in Tamil minority in the country. In this background Sri Lankan Tamil grievances gained much needed moral support from the Tamil Nadu people.

As pointed out by Sivarajah(1990) Tamil politics in Sri Lanka took an aggressive stance since 1970's & became more violent after the Black July of 1983. The July 1983 racial riot in Sri Lanka was a watershed in the case of Tamil Nadu as far as the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka is concerned. A wave of spontaneous indignation swept throughout Tamil Nadu and life in that state came to a virtual standstill as all joined hands in public processions and meetings against the killing of Tamils in Sri Lanka. At this stage, it is pertinent to note that war mongering politicians and the forever misled populace of Tamil Nadu are naturally having their insurmountable problems and other pressing issues for which the rulers and the opposition alike have offered little or nothing in relief. The Sri Lankan Tamil issue is a convenient scapegoat and a sure ruse to momentarily forget their burning issues and to make political mileage.

The Black July of 1983 Provoked hatred and anger among majority of Tamils in Tamil Nadu and there was substantial pressure from the Tamil Nadu politicians to the Central government of India to intervene in Sri Lanka's ethnic problem as a regional power. It was clear that the pressure from Tamil Nadu politics was an important factor that led to the Indian intervention of Sri Lanka in 1987 and signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord.

The Indian intervention in Sri Lanka can be considered as an important example for an ethnic basis intervention on small countries internal affairs by a big power. Turkish intervention in Cyprus, Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine are ideal examples to show how an ethnic linkage with small countries has affected powerful nation's state behaviour. The Indian intervention in 1987 and subsequent military engagement with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) by the Indian armed forces ended up in failure and caused severe embarrassment to the Indian government.

Since the failure of India's military intervention in 1987, India had a more moderate approach to ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. India maintained a stance of pressuring Sri Lanka on devolution of power within the island based on the guidelines of 13th amendment which is an outcome of the indo-Sri Lanka accord of 1987. Meanwhile India also maintained a tough stance on LTTE, banning it as a terrorist organization and recognizing the LTTE as a threat to its own national security.

Even though, Indian central government become moderate in Sri Lanka issue the majority of Tamil Nadu Politicians adopted a hardline stance on the Sri Lankan government due to prevailing civil war in Sri Lanka. The war was a 'godsend' to them. The idol worshipping TN masses who essentially lead dull lives, could be galvanised in to action by the sabre rattling political icons to meet their ends but with disproportionately low benefits to the Sri Lankan Tamils. In the same vein, the paradoxical attitude of the TN ruling elite towards their own 'poaching violations' amply display their hypocritical nature and inhuman disregard towards their brethren across the Palk straits. Some political parties offered the fullest cooperation to LTTE publically, placing Indian Central government at unease. The moderate stance by the Indian government helped Sri Lanka immensely to eradicate terrorism from Sri Lanka in 2009. The bitter experience in 1987 kept India away from intervening in Sri Lanka's civil war, even though there was tremendous pressure from the Tamil Nadu politicians on Central government during the last stages of the war. Since the end of the civil war in May 2009, an important factor that continues to shape the Sri Lankan government's relations with India is the Tamil Nadu's clout to influence the Indian Central government to adopt anti-Sri Lanka policies.

Among the many factors that contributed to the India's vote in favour of United States resolution on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, pressure from Tamil Nadu was clearly evident. The vote created an enormous angst and political bickering in India. The India's votes in 2013 and 2014 strained the good will among two countries and it compelled to divert the Sri Lankan government towards a closer relationship with India's rival - China. India had to come under enormous pressure from the United States and from Tamil political parties in of Tamil Nadu to vote in favour of the resolution. India voted in favour of resolutions, but only after significantly watering down the content of the resolutions. Both resolutions were opposed by the Sri Lankan government, which has refused to implement its recommendations highlighting its negative impact on sovereignty of the island.

With the government change in 2015 in Sri Lanka there is a positive development in Indo-Sri Lanka Relations. The new Sri Lankan government has assured the International community on a satisfactory future reconciliation and power sharing mechanism targeting Tamil minority.

INFLUENCES OF EXTERNAL ACTORS ON INDO-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

Apart from Tamil politics in both India and Sri Lanka, the foreign relation of Sri Lanka with other major powers in the world has had an important impact on state behaviour of India in particular. Sri Lanka's present relations with China in particular on different fields are no doubt are a nagging concern for India in shaping its attitude towards Sri Lanka. Before highlighting the China factor in present context of shaping Indo Sri Lanka state behaviour there are solid examples on how external factors have affected Indo-Sri Lanka relations.

From its independence Sri Lanka adopted a foreign policy based on two principles. The two most important factors in Sri Lanka's foreign policy since independence have been a commitment to nonalignment and the necessity of recognizing Indian sphere of influence in the region without sacrificing its independence. But the cordial relationship took a turn for worse in late 1970's and 1980's as then Sri Lankan government was trying to improve its political and economic relations with the United States and other Western countries. President J.R. Jayewardene adopted an open economic policy and preferred more interactions with west for a rapid economic growth. In this background, some observers

interpreted Sri Lanka's unsuccessful bid in 1982 to gain membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an attempt to establish a comfortable buffer between itself and India. The application was rejected, ostensibly on geographic grounds (Global Security, 2015)

President Jayewardene's intentions on leasing oil tank farm in Trincomalee to an US company and improving military ties with Israel and Pakistan brought anxiety to Indian policy makers and it affected on the state behaviour of India towards Sri Lanka. Apart from Tamil politics in both India and Sri Lanka, the foreign relations of Sri Lanka with other major powers have had a critical impact on state behaviour of India in particular. Sri Lanka's present relations with China particularly in diverse fields, are no doubt a worrisome concern for India in shaping its attitude towards Sri Lanka. Before highlighting the China factor in present context of shaping Indo-Sri Lanka state behaviour, there are good examples on how external factors have affected Indo-Sri Lanka relations.

In 1980's -based on the intelligence reports- policy makers in new Delhi were determined to prevent Sri Lanka from developing closer ties with unfriendly or potentially unfriendly foreign powers such as Pakistan, Israel, and the United States. India used the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka as a weak point and helped nurture Tamil separatists through their intelligence agencies. Finally, in 1987 India highhandedly intervened in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict highlighting its concerns for Tamils but also with the motive of ending Sri Lanka's close relations with West and Pakistan.

In an exchange of executive letters coinciding with the July 29, 1987, accord, President Jayewardene gave assurances to Gandhi that the port of Trincomalee would not be used by foreign powers -including the United States- and that agreements with the United States to upgrade the Voice of America facility and with Israel and Pakistan to provide military security would be reconsidered (Global Security, 2015).The Indo Sri Lanka accord of 1987 was a clear example of the hegemonic role of India in its sphere of influence. This incident highlights the hypocritical role of India, in accepting Sri Lanka as an independent state but not giving her a free rein away from the clutches of Indian influence at any cost. For many Sri Lankans, the July 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and the involvement of a large number of Indian

troops in the Northeast, however, seemed to be an unacceptable compromise of national independence. (Global Security, 2015)

Sending troops to Sri Lanka brought about a dismal failure resulting in the death of more than 2000 Indian servicemen and the tragic death of her Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, but it certainly brought an end to the involvement of external actors in Sri Lanka for much satisfaction of policy makers in New Delhi.

According to Global Security, 2015 the 'India Today' correspondent quoted a senior Indian military officer as asserting that "Pakistan's military involvement in Sri Lanka ended on July 29, 1987." But other observers wondered whether India, by cutting the Gordian knot of the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis and hoping at the same time to thwart Pakistan's ambitions, was finally exercising its full potential as one of the world's major nations or was being drawn into a military nightmare with a lethal & determined enemy that would result in terrific costs of men and material but with little or nothing in rewards.

THE EFFECT OF CHINA FACTOR IN INDO SRI LANKA RELATIONS

In recent times, the economic growth of China had been phenomenal. According to IMF China became the world's largest economy surpassing United States. This growing sphere of economic influence of China has put the world's super power United States and other regional heavyweights at unease, provoking a threat to their hegemony. China has become the most important trade partner and investor in most of the South Asian countries, posing a challenge to India's regional hegemony.

During the past few years China emerged as the most important investor of Sri Lanka in financing strategically important infrastructure development projects. Funding the development of Hambantota port and airport, expansion of Colombo port, building Norochcholai power plant and laying of expressways were mainly carried out with Chinese assistance.

Most of the policy makers in New Delhi fear that with massive involvement of Chinese in development projects in Sri Lanka, it will lead to a futuristic threat to national security of India. The article by Hariharan 2013 argues that China's strategic clout in Sri Lanka is increasing every day. Many of Chinese assisted projects like Colombo container terminal, Hambantota port and Mattala airport,

satellite and telecom endeavours provide legitimate access to Chinese specialist personnel. Under President Xi Jinping efforts are on to build closer strategic linkages with Sri Lanka. These will have serious connotations for India's national security and maritime security. China's soft power is increasingly visible in all aspects of Sri Lanka society –political, diplomatic, and development fronts as well. Chinese entry into real estate and some manufacturing projects are also coming through. Chinese language teaching and cultural aspects are also spreading as a Confucius Centre is scheduled to be opened in Colombo.

In the eyes of New Delhi policy makers the whole of South Asia is considered to be a part of India's sphere of influence which its need to maintain the regional hegemony. Some policy makers go even further, highlighting in the whole of Indian Ocean, that it should be in exercising her power. But since the rise of China as the largest economy in the world and its subsequent increase in the trade and other economic activities with South Asian countries in recent times has placed India in an uneasy situation. And increasingly she feels the threat to her regional hegemony at her doorstep

As Singh, 2015 argues, China has made investments in many Indian Ocean littorals, and especially in Sri Lanka and Pakistan to ensure a smooth transportation of its energy resources through the Ocean. To this end, Beijing needs a peaceful and stable neighbourhood to achieve 'Comprehensive National Power' and for this quest a 'peaceful periphery' has become a pre-requisite to Chinese foreign policy. Meanwhile volatile domestic politics of the host countries are playing crucial roles in shaping the geo-politics of the region.

THE STRING OF PEARLS CONCEPT

The "string of Pearls" (Hamilton, 2005) is a concept that was put forward by many American scholars and which has gained popularity among many of the Indians. This now has become a syndrome in many a mind of the New Delhi policy makers. According to String of pearls concept, China is trying to encircle India by building naval facilities around the neighbours of India such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan etc...

According to this concept Hambantota is believed to be a Chinese naval choke point in the future. In this background, Chinese assistance to develop Hambantota port in particular and other infrastructure development

has drawn attention of India's politicians, military and academia. In India's defence analytical view, it will never tolerate Sri Lanka becoming an important Chinese choke point in the future. They fear if matters develop in this manner, in the future the island can be used geopolitically against India as same way the Soviet Union used island nation of Cuba against the United States during the cold war and how the United States used the island of Taiwan against the mainland China. India in the recent past has increased the development assistance to Sri Lanka and even established a consulate in Hambantota, duly recognising the importance of countering Chinese influence in the island.

But according to Sri Lankan point of view the developments with Chinese assistance in Hambantota and elsewhere are much needed investments for the country as it is trying to emerge from the ashes of 30 years of civil war. As a strategically located island nation in the Indian Ocean, historically it has been an important maritime hub. Many Sri Lankan naval strategists believe the infrastructure development in the maritime sector is the key to future economic development in the island. In eyes of some of the Sri Lankan naval strategists, the String of Pearls concept is developed without taking into consideration, the historical fact that the Sri Lanka's role as an important maritime hub and its strong relations with China did not have much of a bearing on the Indo-Sri Lanka relations. It's argued (Jayarathna, 2015) that this island nation had maintained maritime links with China many centuries before the advent of Westerners in to the Indian Ocean. And at the same time, the island had been subjected to South Indian invasions from time to time across the ocean. Hence the rationale of "String of Pearls" with an aim to choke some country or to extend one's authority, naturally is a matter that is difficult to comprehend.

MAINTAINING AN EQUILIBRIUM IN THE RELATIONSHIP

Sri Lanka is a much small country when it is compared to India and is definitely located within the area of her sphere of influence. Sri Lanka as country has to realise the above stark reality and she has to facilitate her foreign policy initiatives according to this background.

Due to the ethnic linkage of Sri Lankan Tamils with Tamil Nadu, resolving Tamil grievances by the Sri Lankan government to a satisfactory level demanded by the Tamils in Sri Lanka is of paramount importance for both countries when it comes to developing a positive state

behaviour towards each other. If majority of Tamil parties in North can come to a compromise with the Central government of Sri Lanka on governance and power sharing, it will definitely carry good tidings to Tamil Nadu from their cousins here. Achieving this task without compromising sovereignty is the crucial task of Sri Lankan government in this regard. There are hard liners both in Sri Lankan and Tamil Nadu Tamil communities who are in search of the ultimate goal of achieving a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Both the governments have banned LTTE and in recent times have adopted a tough stance on hard liners. In this background it will be the primary task of Sri Lanka to achieve a political solution which is acceptable to all communities of Sri Lanka with the fullest cooperation of its regional power -India. If the current reconciliation process would be accepted by the war affected Tamil community in Sri Lanka, it will be good news to Tamil Nadu and will lead to a toned down pressure from Tamil Nadu to its Central government on its bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

In contemporary relations between India and Sri Lanka, Chinese influence in this island nation is the most influential external factor that affects the bilateral relations. As mentioned above it is evident that the Sri Lanka's close links with China worried the policy makers in New Delhi. In Sri Lanka's interest, she should have healthy relationships with all countries including India and China. There is no reason for any conflict of interest between its relationship with India and China from the point of view of Sri Lanka. (Daily News, 2015)

With the new government in Sri Lanka, it is important to find equilibrium in the Chinese factor. On one hand China is very important to Sri Lanka as it is the fastest growing major economy in the world, where it will be the main impetus for providing much needed development assistance to the country, but on the other hand she has to balance her 'big brother' neighbour. The delicate balancing act is decisive for island nation as for the bitter experience she gained in the 1980s which led to the infamous Indian intervention in the country. In this background, as argued by Srinivasan, 2014 Sri Lanka must keep India regularly informed in order to allay strategic fears.

As India is inevitably the most crucial bilateral partner of Sri Lanka, she is geo-politically entangled in a permanent relationship with India which has to be mutually accepted as an irreversible feature of foreign policy of the country.

On the other hand India has to understand needs of its neighbours on the path to development. The wealth of China is important to Sri Lanka as well as it is important to India as both countries are seeking rapid development. In this regard, one also has to look into the United States where 'String of Pearls' theory had to be viewed with care and suspicion because they have their own agendas. In this background, communications with each other at highest levels of policy makers and mutual trust of each other are the feasible solutions for equilibrium on external influences in their bilateral relations.

As argued by 'The Island' 2013 lack of candour and accommodation in bilateral interactions should be replaced by frank dialogue between political leaders and other interlocutors on either side, thereby eliminating opportunities for negative political orchestration by parties with vested interests and hawkish individuals. The adversarial elements of the relationship that have emerged, from time to time, should be replaced with mutual trust, openness and understanding of the contentious issues involved. It is high time to reset Indo-Lanka relations.

CONCLUSION

Bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka have traditionally been critical for both countries. Both India's and Sri Lanka's foreign policy assertiveness, fuelled by domestic dynamism and external influence, makes many believe that the above factors influence and drive their relationship. Clannish politics in Tamil Nadu are eternally entwined with the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. In addition to India's deep concern in the region as a heavy weight combined with influence of Tamil Nadu over Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, is generally considered a critical factor in India's bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. From Sri Lanka's point of view, the Tamil Nadu domestic politics linked with Sri Lankan ethnic issue have influenced India's actions on Sri Lanka in a very decisive manner. In the contrary, from the Indian perspective, Sri Lanka's external relations - particularly with China - are an important geo-strategic concern for India as the regional power in aligning its bilateral relations with the island nation. Sri Lanka's geostrategic location is a concern to Indian security because of the possibility the involvement of external powers with Sri Lanka against India's strategic and security interests. The concept of "String of Pearls"

and Sri Lanka's improving ties with China in recent times have created unease among policy makers in New Delhi.

In order to maintain equilibrium in the bilateral relations among the two countries, from the Sri Lankan side it has to understand the eternal interest of India as a regional power in South Asia and she must keep India duly informed in order to avoid strategic fears, taking into example the harrowing experience that she had with India in 1980's. On the other hand, resolving Tamil grievances by the Sri Lankan government to a satisfactory level as demanded by the Tamils in Sri Lanka is of paramount importance for both countries when it comes developing a positive state behaviour towards each other. India must extend its fullest support to the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka in post war period within a frame work of not weakening the sovereignty of the island nation. At the same time, India should understand the development needs of Sri Lanka and its right for engagement with external actors to achieve development goals. To achieve equilibrium in the relationship, there should be frequent bilateral interactions among the decision making elite of the political hierarchy of both countries with mutual trust, openness and in depth understanding of the contentious issues involved.

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