

Sri Lanka's Defence Relations with Pakistan Post LTTE Conflict

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Abstract— *Sri Lanka and Pakistan have been close friends ever since they won independence from the British. The defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan constitutes a key component in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The Indian factor, and Pakistan's military culture have been deciding factors in determining the course of the defence relations.*

Keywords— Sri Lanka-Pakistan bilateral relations, Defence Relations

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka and Pakistan have been very close allies for more than six decades. Ever since both nations won independence from the British, there has existed a strong mutual understanding and a sense of cooperation between the two countries. The defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan is an interesting case in point. In actual fact, the bilateral relationship between the two countries revolves strongly around defence cooperation and mutual understanding between the respective military establishments. It is therefore interesting to examine the factors that enabled such strong defence partnership to flourish between the two countries. This paper also attempts to evaluate the future of such a relationship under current domestic and regional dynamics.

II. HISTORY OF DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP

The history of defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan goes back to 1971. During the insurrection carried out by the Marxist-Leninist organisation JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), Pakistan heeded Ceylon's appeal for military assistance by sending troops and expertise (Samaranayake, 2008). Later the same year, before the breakout of the third Indo-Pakistani War, the Ceylonese government under Mrs Bandaranaike allowed over flight permission and refuelling facilities to West Pakistan airplanes en route to East Pakistan carrying soldiers (Hindustan Times, 2011).

Even though the fact that Pakistan could refuel and fly over Ceylon did not constitute a decisive element in the outcome of the 1972 war, Ceylon's assistance at that juncture was of momentous symbolic gesture. It displayed Ceylon's sincere cooperation towards Pakistan. When looked at in the context of the geopolitical dynamics in the region at that time, Ceylon was essentially talking a significant risk when she opened her gates to Pakistan, who was the main adversary of India in the 1972 war. The courage and diplomatic prowess with which Ceylon extended her support to Pakistan could have set the foundations of the decade-long friendship between the two countries.

Bilateral defence relations reached their peak during the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) conflict in Sri Lanka. By openly helping Sri Lanka with weapons and training, Pakistan offered invaluable assistance throughout the war. Pakistan's support to Sri Lanka during the LTTE conflict was crucial, so much so, that some analysts have reported that Pakistan was key in the defeat of the LTTE (Business Standard, 2009). Pakistan was one of the two principal suppliers (China being the other) of weapons to Sri Lanka during the Eelam war. Sri Lanka purchased millions of rupees worth of weapons and ammunition from Pakistan. In the midst of such a close defence partnership between Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the LTTE attempted to assassinate the Pakistan high commissioner to Sri Lanka in 2006 (Daily News, 2006). Colonel Bashir Wali Mohamad, the high commissioner, narrowly escaped the attack. The security apparatus initially believed that it was a misidentified attack by the LTTE, since the notion of the Pakistani High Commissioner being in the LTTE hit list was beyond anyone's anticipation. Only upon thorough investigation that the authorities substantiated that it was a premeditated and orchestrated attack against Colonel Bashir by the LTTE. The attack was a clear sign of the scale of the support Pakistan offered to Sri Lanka to fight the LTTE, and the extent to which the LTTE was dissatisfied with Pakistani military assistance.

A. Geopolitical Antecedents

Sri Lanka's strong defence links with Pakistan largely stems from India's disinclination to offer military aid to Sri Lanka during the Eelam war. In post-war Sri Lanka, Indian influence is decided not so much by geostrategic factors as by domestic issues in India. During the Eelam war, Indian influence revolved around the central government and stemmed from Sri Lanka's alignment with the USA in the 80s which troubled India's interest in the region. However, in the post-war era, Indian antagonism derives from domestic sentiments from Tamil Nadu rather than centrally dictated decisions based on geopolitics and strategy. Therefore, any attempt made by the central government to offer military assistance within India's standard framework, has met with vitriol and opposition in Tamil Nadu. The immediate corollary of India's withdrawal of military support is that Sri Lanka turned towards Pakistan more firmly than before.

B. The Military Culture

The people of Pakistan too have much reverence for the military from the very inception of the army. In a country whose strategic culture is shaped by millennia of fighting against aggressors, there is much respect in Pakistan to an institution such as the military. Pakistan sits next to a regional power with whom Pakistan has unresolved border issues. In the west, Pakistan has border conflicts with Afghanistan as well. As a result, Pakistan's military comes across as the saviour of the nation that shoulders the responsibility of protecting Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In a similar light, the Sri Lankan military plays an increasingly important role in the society, especially after the successful victory against the LTTE in 2009. The general public holds the defence establishment with high respect as a result. Not having limited the scope to national security, the peacetime military has ventured into the service sector, such as agriculture and construction. The efficiency with which the military personnel perform the tasks has been received with much appreciation by the general public.

III. MILITARY TRAINING AND EXPERTISE

Pakistan carries on the legacy of the British Indian Training. Infantry School and Staff School in Quetta, Baluchistan was once the British India Staff College for the entire British Imperial force in the Far East region. The Quetta Staff College has produced

several world-renowned military strategists. The most prominent example is Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, who commanded the Eighth Army in the North African theatre and later the 21st Army Group in Europe during the Second World War. The illustrious military heritage aside, Pakistan possessed superior military technology due to her close links with the USA, especially during the Cold War, and later with China. USA has had friendly relationship with Pakistan during the Cold War primarily due to Pakistan's strategic location which was of immense importance to the USA to further her containment policy against the spread of communism. The decade-long alliance with the USA helped Pakistan acquire advance military technology and expertise in research and development. This coupled with Pakistan's heavy emphasis and focus on defence Research and Development, which was necessitated by the economic embargoes the western countries imposed upon Pakistan, enabled them to possess superior military expertise. Moreover, Pakistan has an inherent weakness when it comes to territorial defence. Pakistan does not possess strategic depth because the country is particularly narrow. As a result of that, Pakistan puts very high emphasis on military strategy, doctrine and training. Therefore, her expertise in land warfare is well substantiated and her armed forces are more consolidated.

Sharing of defence capabilities can be seen as an epitome of cooperation between two states in an anarchic international system. Military training and arms trade are often categorised under strategic framework. Consequently, stringent mechanisms prevail in the exercise of sharing military expertise and training. Generally, military training is offered by countries to their allies on a regularly reviewed need to have basis which is similar to exchange pacts. However, in contrast to the standard practice, what has dictated all forms of military training offered by Pakistan to Sri Lanka has always been mutual friendship and understanding between the officers of the defence establishments of the two countries. There is no formal agreement between Sri Lanka and Pakistan that dictates terms and conditions of military training arrangements. Pakistan offers military training to all three components of a fighting force, i.e. Teeth Arm, Support Arm and Combat Services Support Arm. Training is provided at all levels of training, i.e. Young Officer (YO), Junior Command (JC) and Senior Command Levels. Pakistan provides military training

to Sri Lankan armed personnel at its premier defence colleges such as the Quetta Command & Staff College and the National Defence College (NDC). At a given time, around 200 Sri Lankan officers undergo training in Pakistan.

This positive trend has prevailed even after the end of the war in 2009. Pakistan pledged to increase military training to Sri Lanka when Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani visited Sri Lanka in 2013. During his visit, he formally confirmed the Pakistan Army's decision to increase the number of training slots, allocated for Sri Lanka Army officers and soldiers in their training institutes, such as the National Defence College (NDC), Pakistan Army Command and Staff College and Physical Training School (Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka, 2013).

Pakistan's military assistance has stood Sri Lanka in good stead in the face of continuing Tamil Nadu opposition to any training offered to Sri Lankans in India. India Navy Chief Admiral D. K. Joshi, during his visit to Sri Lanka, stated that there shall be no enhancement of interaction with Sri Lanka as far as defence is concerned (Daily Mirror, 2013). This statement came in light of strong opposition from Tamil Nadu against Sri Lankan officers undergoing training in India. For instance, following reports that India had offered to extend a four-year B. Tech course to Sri Lankan naval officers at the Indian Naval Academy at Ezhimala, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha as well as the opposition leader M. Karunanidhi demanded that the policy to train the Sri Lankan naval officers in Indian academies be revoked. Likewise, following similar protests in July 2012, the Indian central government had to shift Sri Lankan air force personnel who were being trained at the air base on the outskirts of Chennai to a facility outside Tamil Nadu. In June 2013, following protests in Tamil Nadu over Sri Lankan officers training at the Wellington-based Defence Services Staff College, Sri Lanka turned to Pakistan for training in their facilities, and training was immediately arranged for the two officers in Pakistan. The transfer of the two officers from India to Pakistan was facilitated purely on mutual friendship between the defence establishment in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

The Defence relationship between the Air Forces of the two countries is also impressive. The Pakistan Air Force chief paid a courtesy call on the commander of the Sri Lanka Air Force in 2009, and

the Sri Lankan Air Force Chief visited Pakistan in 2012 (Sri Lanka Air Force, 2009 and 2013). The assistance Sri Lanka received from Pakistan in the air front was notable. Sri Lankan Air Force pilots were trained in Pakistan during the LTTE conflict. In fact, some open source reports suggest that Pakistan Air Force fighter pilots had flown Sri Lankan aircraft to conduct air strike mission on LTTE bases (The Indian Express, 2009). This narration gained wide currency amongst the Sri Lankan public, even though neither the Sri Lankan Air Force nor the Pakistan Air Force has officially corroborated this claim. When it comes to Sri Lanka's air arsenal, the Pakistan-built K-8 Karakorum is one of the principal training aircraft in possession of the Sri Lanka Air Force. The SLAF extensively sourced weaponry and ammunition from Pakistan such as rockets, bombs, air-to-air missiles and fuses. Pakistan has decided to start the sale of modern JF-17 to Sri Lanka from 2014. The JF-17 is a state-of-the-art combat warplane, which is developed by Pakistan with the collaboration of China (Daily Mirror, 2013). However, according to military sources, the decision to purchase JF-17 aircraft had been made a year ago, although the Sri Lankan media gave coverage to the event only recently. Given the scale and magnitude of the bilateral relations between the two countries, it is quite interesting why such a newsworthy item was not broken until one year after the occurrence of the event. Needless to say, the lack of media publicity given to Sri Lanka's relations with Pakistan, as opposed to with other countries such as India, has constituted a notable lacuna to the furtherance of bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Navy-to-Navy relationship between the two countries is warm and cordial. In high level visits between the two Navies, Admiral (R) D. W. A. S. Disanayake as Commander of Sri Lanka Navy visited Pakistan in June 2012, this was followed by the visit of Vice Admiral J. S. K. Colombage in November 2012. The Pakistani navy chief, Admiral Asif Sandila, visited Sri Lanka in 2013 on a three-day official visit, during which he launched the Sri Lankan Chapter of Pakistan's Naval War College Alumni Association, aka PNWCAA (Sri Lanka Navy, 2013; Colombo Page, 2013). The Sri Lankan Navy, for the first time, dispatched her naval ships to participate in AMAN 13 exercise conducted by the Pakistan Navy in March 2013 (Daily Mirror, 2013). Pakistan has also been regularly sending a senior

officer for participation in Galle Dialogue since its inception in 2010.

In the intelligence front, Pakistan has agreed to offer training to Sri Lankan police and intelligence service officers (Daily Mirror, 2011). Given Pakistan's exposure to the application of intelligence theories and practices will be of much benefit to the Sri Lankan intelligence apparatus, especially in a post-LTTE context. Even though the military wing of LTTE was decisively defeated in 2009, there have been several sporadic attempts to revive the movement. The most daring of those attempts was unearthed and thwarted by the defence establishment in 2014 owing to the vigilance of intelligence services in Sri Lanka (BBC World, 2014). Despite such setbacks, those LTTE carders who fled the war zone in 2009 are hell-bent to bring back the LTTE. Therefore, the importance of intelligence is felt in Sri Lanka unlike ever before.

IV. MUTUAL FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN COMRADES

What is interesting about the defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan is that it solely defined by mutual understanding and friendship as opposed to an alliance or a defence pact. There is a strong mutual understanding between the militaries in the two countries. Many high-ranking officers in both militaries are close colleagues and batch-mates owing to the training programmes they have attended. Sri Lanka military officers consider Pakistanis to be very friendly and hospitable, and vice versa. There are several incidents of friendship in the defence establishments which colour the pages of the bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Such events stand in testimony for the overriding power of mutual understanding between the comrades when deciding on a sensitive issue such as defence cooperation.

Pakistan has not only been sincere, but also generous in her support to Sri Lanka to combat terrorism. President General Zia Ul-Huq, during his visit to Sri Lanka, had guaranteed to provide all required military hardware to combat the terrorists in whatever quantities that the military required (Ranatunga, 2009). Mutual friendship proved to be invaluable during the Elephant Pass debacle in 2000, when the LTTE overran the military position in Elephant Pass in the North of Sri Lanka. Elephant Pass (aka EPS) is a strategically important military base which stands on the isthmus that connects the

Jaffna peninsula to the Sri Lankan mainland. The LTTE launched its *Operation Unceasing Waves III* against the Sri Lankan military base in EPS in the early hours of 22nd April 2000. The multi-pronged attack on the EPS base forced the Sri Lanka Army to effect a tactical withdrawal towards Kodikamam, further north of the peninsula. At this juncture, Sri Lanka made a presidential level appeal to Pakistan to obtain MBRLs (Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers). During this time, the head of state of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, was a close friend and a colleague of the then commander of the Army, General C. S. Weerasooriya. The subsequent response from Pakistan was swift. Two MBRLs in service with the Pakistan Army were immediately airlifted to Sri Lanka. The firepower from the MBRLs allowed the Army to deliver the required punch to stop the LTTE assault in its tracks, and forced them to withdraw to the Muhamalai and Nagarkovil defensive lines. The MBRL also prevented the LTTE from using their light artillery to inflict casualties on the Army. The heavy troop concentration in Kodikamam area was a double-edged weapon. On one hand, it raised troop morale thereby giving the Army a tactical advantage; but on the other hand, high troop concentration made the forces in the area vulnerable to enemy artillery fire. However, the LTTE was deterred from taking advantage of the close formations of troops and firing mortars into Army positions due to the existence of the MBRLs, which decimated LTTE mortar installations the moment enemy artillery was registered (Gen Rajaguru, 2013; Gen Weerasooriya, 2013).

Without this prompt military assistance from Pakistan, the fate of the Sri Lanka army personnel stationed in the North would have been dire. Due to the urgency of the requirement, the transfer of military hardware was not made conditional on the fulfilment of its financial transactions. If Pakistan had followed strict procedures and waited till the payments were settled, it would have taken months for the MBRLs to reach the SLA. The beleaguered situation at that time necessitated prompt action, something which is only attainable through friendship and mutual understanding.

In 2012, the Pakistan Army gifted six horses to the Sri Lanka Army to fulfil equestrian training requirements for officers at the Sri Lankan Military Academy (SLMA) at Diyathalawa (Sri Lanka Army, 2013). The Pakistan offer came as a response to a request made by the former commander of the Army General Jagath Jayasuriya to his Pakistani

counterpart General Ashfaq Kayani. It is important to note that the entire transaction was swift and was purely based on mutual understanding between the defence personnel. This should be viewed in light of Sri Lanka's request for training horses from India much earlier, in 2007 which had not realised even until the Pakistani horses had arrived in Sri Lanka. One could trace the reasons for the delay systemic causes such as bureaucracy and red tape which is inherent in the Indian system. Mutual friendship that exists between the military establishments carries great value in the Pakistani political system, which is rooted in strong military culture. It adds a special dynamism to the bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and Pakistan. In contrast, the friendship that exists in the defence strata is rendered powerless in a country that is less oriented in military culture, such as India.

The friendship between the comrades persists as they advance in their respective careers in parallel, thus consolidates friendship all the way up to the highest ranks in the military. Since training is a continuous process, every year a new batch of Sri Lankan officers get to know a batch of Pakistani officers. As a result, as long as training exists, the mutual understanding between the military continues in a loop.

There have been significant visits made by both Pakistani and Sri Lankan military officials in all three branches to their respective counterparts. Usually a high-ranking officer would only make one official visit to a foreign country. In contrast, the chief of Pakistan Army, General Ashfaq Kayani, visited Sri Lanka twice during his tenure (The Official Government Portal, Sri Lanka, 2013). This unique occurrence bears witness to the strong mutual friendship that exists between the two countries. The defence relations are so strong that, when the High Commission of Pakistan in Sri Lanka celebrated the Defence Day of Pakistan on 6th September 2013, top military officers attended the ceremony, amongst them the Chief of Defence Staff in Sri Lanka as well as the commanders of Sri Lanka Army and the Sri Lanka Navy (Asian Tribune 2013).

V. DEFENCE LINKS TO LEVERAGE TRADE

The existing cordial relationship between the defence establishments in Sri Lanka and Pakistan comes across as a useful tool which can be used to leverage bilateral trade. With its overriding characteristics to influence decision-making, such

backchannels within the political establishments of both countries are a vital asset for the furtherance of bilateral trade as well as the overall relationship.

The strong defence ties between Sri Lanka and Pakistan played a key role in Sri Lanka's decision to switch to Pakistan for the purchase of official vehicles for the Sri Lankan military. Subsequently, over 100 Pakistan-manufactured *Toyota* cars were purchased by the Sri Lankan authorities for the use of high-ranking officers in Sri Lanka Army and the Police (Sri Lanka Army, 2014). Sri Lanka's decision to turn to India's rival Pakistan to purchase vehicles is a noteworthy phenomenon, which, in my opinion, has three dimensions; economic, personal and diplomacy. As far as economic aspects are concerned, Sri Lanka is able to obtain Japanese vehicles at a lower rate. The Toyotas are manufactured in Pakistan; all components of the car are locally sourced and manufactured except the engines. The engines are imported from Japan solely to maintain the integrity of the quality of the vehicles. Secondly, since the vehicles are to be used by the officers in the Sri Lanka Army and the Police, it is a boost to an already strong relationship between the defence establishments in the two countries. Thirdly, the decision to purchase Toyota vehicles from Pakistan has to be viewed in light of the existing situation. In a broader International Relations perspective, it displays the pivotal role played by the personnel in Sri Lankan and Pakistani defence establishments in the realisation of the deal. The majority of vehicles that are currently being used by the officers of the police and the army are Indian-built, and purchased from India. As a result, the existing trade conduits with the corresponding Indian institutions had to be bypassed in order to initiate new trade links with Pakistan. Such a feat is only achievable with strong push from backchannels in the decision-making apparatus.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In principle, Sri Lanka, having been in the forefront of the Non-Aligned movement, cannot enter into defence alliances with Pakistan, or any other country for that matter. An interesting aspect of the defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan is that it is solely driven by mutual trust and friendship. Therefore, the military-to-military ties that exist between Sri Lanka and Pakistan carry a unique value to the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

The defence ties between Sri Lanka and Pakistan shall remain a key determinant in the strategic equations of both countries inasmuch as the cultural orientation of the two countries towards their respective militaries. As a result, it will be interesting to witness the progression in the defence ties in light of the establishment of a strong political system in Pakistan.

Furthermore, the defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan always brings India into the picture, who is the principal player in South Asia. The bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and Pakistan will not be a meaningful one, neither domestically nor in a regional sense, when it is achieved at the expense of antagonising India. India is a decisive factor in determining the future course of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka constitutes a vital element in Indian strategic equations due to her position just south of India. According to the renowned defence journal "Small Wars Journal" Sri Lanka is the most ideal location to further the security interests of India, whether it is maritime security, control of terrorism or the mitigation of the spread of Chinese influence (Anderson & Wijeyesekera, 2011). Pakistani defence assistance to Sri Lanka has thus far been only in the form of military training and conventional arms trade. The bilateral defence ties of such limited scope does not threaten Indian strategic interests in the region, nor impacts the regional power balance. Therefore, Sri Lanka and Pakistan can only engage in defence ties insofar as Indian strategic interests in the region are not threatened.

Due to Sri Lanka's limited power projection capabilities, Sri Lanka should not antagonise any nation, as she needs the cooperation of all states to prosper in the International System. Sri Lanka cannot and should not use Pakistan or her links with China or USA to bypass India in regional matters. This reality was brutally demonstrated during the Cold War in the 80s when Sri Lanka aligned with the USA-Led western power bloc in an attempt to check Indian hegemony. However, in the run up to the Indo-Sri Lankan accord in 1987, the USA, being an ally of Sri Lanka at that juncture, refused to interfere and assist Sri Lanka. The USA did not want to lose her interests in the South Asian region by antagonising India, who was of much greater importance to the USA despite her siding with the Soviet bloc.

The basic tenets of the bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and India are different from the antecedents of the Indo-Pakistan relationship. Sri Lanka's relationship with Pakistan, with its unique value to both countries, constitutes the third edge in the inter-state triangle. However, all three edges need to interact, yet not interfere with each other, so as to maintain the integrity of the whole form. Therefore, as long as Sri Lanka's relationship with Pakistan does not endanger the foundations of Indo-Lanka relations, the bilateral defence partnership between Sri Lanka and Pakistan has the potential to endure post LTTE and in the midst of the regional power dynamics between India and China.

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