

India and Sri Lanka: Two Countries, Four Verticals

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The relationship between India and Sri Lanka during the last decade has been witnessing ups and downs. With the LTTE neutralised in May 2009, there was an expectation that it would result in increased cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. However, the relationship became complex, with multiple vectors playing new roles. Again in 2015, when Maithripala Sirisena became the President of Sri Lanka and brought an end to Rajapaksa's rule, there was another round of expectations that it would lead to a new era in Colombo-Delhi interactions. Ranil Wickremesinghe became the Prime Minister in January 2015. Both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were considered closer to New Delhi, unlike Rajapaksa who was reaching out to Beijing and undermining India's interests. While the relationship did not deteriorate during the last four years (2015–19), it did not reach new heights either.

What are the contemporary issues which are preventing the two countries from gaining momentum and reaching new heights in bilateral relations? What can be done to infuse new synergy between India and Sri Lanka?

Four Distinct Characteristics of the Relationship - Multiple Actors

Structurally, the India-Sri Lanka relationship is not defined by a simple framework. One can observe four distinct characteristics of the relationship, and multiple actors within those four, exerting pressure on the bilateral relationship. These verticals include Colombo-Jaffna, Colombo-Beijing, UNP-SLFP and New Delhi-Chennai linkages.

Besides the above four verticals, there are new fault lines within Sri Lanka that are likely to put pressure on the bilateral relationship between Colombo and New Delhi. For example, growing Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and the fallout of the Easter terror attacks in Colombo are likely to create new fault lines within Sri Lanka, with an implication for India-Sri Lanka relations.

The Colombo-Jaffna Vertical: One Country, Two Expectations

One of the biggest challenges for New Delhi during the last decade has been to balance the differing expectations from Colombo and Jaffna.

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The Sri Lankan Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka have been looking for Indian support during the last three decades of ethnic conflict. While India intervened directly during the 1980s, since the 1990s India's role has been more measured; it has avoided getting directly dragged into the internal situation in Sri Lanka. Operation Poomalai in 1986 witnessed the airdropping of essentials as a sign of India's support to the Sri Lankan Tamils. The subsequent signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord in July 1987 by the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and Sri Lankan President Jayewardene, followed by the sending of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka was a part of the direct intervention by New Delhi. India also played a substantial role in the enactment of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka.

Post the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), India's support to the Sri Lankan Tamils became more nuanced. While it supported the cause of Sri Lankan Tamils, it did not accept the LTTE as the spokesman of the latter. The rise of China at the global level, and Beijing's interest in Sri Lanka has made New Delhi's position further nuanced in dealing with Colombo and Jaffna. While India has to look after the interests of Sri Lankan Tamils, it has also had to ensure that Colombo does not fall into the Chinese sphere of influence. New Delhi has had to pursue a delicate balance between Colombo and Jaffna ever since. Moreover, this continues even after the decimation of LTTE and the end of Eelam War IV. While India is keen to support the rehabilitation process in the North (of Sri Lanka) to address the concerns of the Tamils, it also has to ensure that Colombo does not feel overlooked.

Colombo-Jaffna relations have worsened during the last five years, despite an elected government both the places. The Sinhalese political leadership in Colombo and the Sri Lankan Tamil political leadership in Jaffna could not reach a consensus on various issues, thus politicising the post-war rehabilitation process. This is not a problem specific to India alone; many other countries and agencies that wanted to work with rehabilitation in the North and East of Sri Lanka, have faced the same problem.

With no elected government in Jaffna now, the Colombo-Jaffna Vertical is likely to fester, and impinge further on India's approach towards Sri Lanka.

The Colombo-Beijing Vertical: Balancing Geography with Politics

The biggest challenge for India has been Sri Lanka's strategy emerging from Colombo-Beijing relations which have grown in during recent years.

While, geographically, economically and historically, Sri Lanka is closer to India, Mahinda Rajapaksa made a bold attempt to change all the above by aligning Sri Lanka closer with China. Since 2005, when Rajapaksa became the President, the relationship between the two steadily progressed.

It all started with China providing substantial defence supplies to Sri Lanka, enabling Rajapaksa to fight the LTTE. According to reports, China had provided Sri Lanka with military supplies worth more than US\$ 35 million. It included regular ammunition, jet fighters, and anti-aircraft guns. With India and the USA reluctant to support anti-LTTE war preparations of Rajapaksa, he used it as an excuse to get aligned with China. Thus, Rajapaksa was instrumental in opening Sri Lanka to China. Financial investments and infrastructural projects poured into Sri Lanka. The South Container Terminal, the Colombo Port City Project, the International Airport in Mattala, etc. are some of the big infrastructure projects that were signed during Rajapaksa's rule.

However, one of the biggest infrastructure projects was the agreement between Colombo and Beijing to construct the Hambantota port in the southern part of Sri Lanka. It became worse for India when Colombo (whether under pressure from Beijing or otherwise) leased the Hambantota port to China, along with 15,000 acres of land around it, for 99 years. Outside the lease, when a Chinese submarine docked in Sri Lanka for the first time, it enhanced the fears in New Delhi about Sri Lanka's intentions.

For Beijing, Rajapaksa was an opportunity, and a willing partner which was ready to invite China into Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka under Rajapaksa became a crucial hog in China's Indian Ocean approach in two critical ways.

First, Colombo became the most prominent Indian Ocean pillar for Beijing's Maritime Silk Route (MSR) idea, which was a precursor to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both Sri Lanka and the Maldives occupy important geographic and strategic positions in the Indian Ocean. Neither Myanmar nor Pakistan (in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, respectively) can provide the strategic location that Sri Lanka and the Maldives provide.

Second, Colombo also became the investment and infrastructure hub for China in the Indian Ocean, overlooking the international shipping lanes and even the Malacca Strait.

When Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the Presidential elections to Maithripala Sirisena in 2015, it was expected that the new government, led by Ranil

Wickremesinghe, would return to the pre-Rajapaksa days in balancing relations between Beijing and New Delhi.

Though there have been signs of a balanced approach towards India by Sri Lanka as is evident in the many measures that have been put into place during Rajapaksa's period. However, it has not been easy for Sri Lanka to return to the pre-2007 period. A case in point is the Colombo Port City project. The commitments and agreements between Sri Lanka and China are substantial, and it is not easy for any government to completely overturn.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe Vertical: Your enemy is my enemy; but you are not my friend

When Maithripala Sirisena was elected as the President of Sri Lanka in 2015, along with Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister, there was an expectation that both would work together in addressing the immediate political, societal, and economic issues facing Sri Lanka. The biggest threat to the post-Rajapaksa political process came from within. Both - President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe could not reach a consensus, leading to a cold war between the two. Despite the local elections in 2018 showing signs of a Rajapaksa wave, the two refused to come together. In October 2018, the Maithripala-Ranil vector became ugly. President Sirisena removed Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, and what was worse, appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

The course of events described above highlight not just the difference between the two individuals, but also the distance between two constitutional institutions in Sri Lanka: the posts of the President and the Prime Minister. Sirisena was elected as the President, thanks to the support of the UNP. Had Ranil and the UNP not agreed to Sirisena being the joint candidate, the latter could not have won the Presidential election in 2015. At that time, Sirisena was not a popular leader, even within his party.

The fallout between the two individuals and the two parties has also meant a paralysis in governance. Both had earlier promised accountability, development, and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The divide between the two also impacted the Colombo-Jaffna Vertical, and is likely to change New Delhi-Colombo Vertical further.

The New Delhi-Chennai Vertical: One Country, Two Perceptions

An essential factor in the New Delhi-Chennai Vertical is the interaction between New Delhi and Chennai regarding Sri Lanka.

There is an inherent structural problem in India's external relations vis-à-vis the neighbourhood. It looks at the neighbours primarily from the point of view of capital, New Delhi, with little or no inputs from the immediate region that shares political and ethnic borders with the neighbours. India-Sri Lanka relations suffer from the same framework which has to be seen outside the political context, and more in terms of how the MEA looks at the region.

Besides the above framework led by the South Block (MEA), there is a bigger political problem between New Delhi and Chennai. Led by Dravidian political parties, State politics in Tamil Nadu have a limited presence and influence in New Delhi, and their influence depends on whom they support in the Parliament. The two leading national parties - the Congress and the BJP - could never have sufficient political presence in Tamil Nadu to understand and reflect the perceptions of the Tamil community towards Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan Tamil issue is an emotional issue for Chennai. Sri Lanka is a security issue for New Delhi. While Chennai looks at Jaffna, it criticises New Delhi for failing to do so adequately. Worse, Chennai complains that New Delhi looks at Colombo at the cost of Sri Lankan Tamils.

The Colombo-Beijing Vertical is non-existent in Chennai. The same, however, tops the list of priorities for New Delhi. In the 1980s, there was a similar pattern between New Delhi and Chennai in Sri Lanka. The idea of a Voice of America (VoA) station in Sri Lanka rang alarm bells in New Delhi, forcing India to take Sri Lanka seriously. However, the VoA in Sri Lanka during that time was not the Sri Lanka debate in Tamil Nadu; instead, it was ethnic conflict and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees that formed the core of Chennai's Sri Lanka outlook.

Despite coalition politics, with one of the Dravidian political parties supporting the Congress and the other Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the distance between New Delhi and Chennai has not become shorter vis-à-vis Jaffna and Colombo. At the civil society level within Tamil Nadu, the rise of narrow politics has further complicated desirable unbiased political approach to Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Tamils.

The Future: Will it get better, or worse?

The recent elections in India and the forthcoming elections in Sri Lanka (both Parliamentary and Presidential) are likely to play a crucial role in taking India-Sri Lanka relations forward. The BJP has won the elections in 2019 with a thumping majority, and the country has witnessed the return of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister.

However, although the BJP has made impressive inroads in North and North-east India, its performance in the just concluded elections in South India is poor. It could not win a single seat out of the 39 Parliamentary seats in Tamil Nadu. The DMK- the BJP's (and that of the AIADMK) primary opponent - has won substantially. The expectation is that when there is an election for the State Legislative Assembly in Tamil Nadu, the DMK is likely to return to power.

Whether the DMK will return to power in the near future or otherwise, with no seats in Tamil Nadu, the BJP is likely to look at Sri Lanka more from New Delhi's prism, caring less for Chennai. One is expected to witness the New Delhi-Chennai vector facing a rough time.

Outside India, in Sri Lanka, there is a general perception that the 2020 elections would witness the return of Mahinda Rajapaksa. While the recent terror attacks on Easter Sunday have created a phobia amongst the majority community, it is believed that it would benefit Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The return of Rajapaksa would mean the deterioration of the Colombo-Jaffna vector. The issue is not just the Rajapaksa factor in Colombo-Jaffna vector. During the last few years, after the demolition of the LTTE, the Sinhalese position at the civil society level towards a settlement of the Tamil issue has become hardened. The rise of Sinhala nationalism, coupled with Buddhist radicalisation led by the Bodu Sena (BBS), a section within the Sri Lankan majority, is against giving any concessions to the Sri Lankan Tamils. The perception is that what the minorities have lost in the war cannot be conceded through political negotiation. Rajapaksa is making use of this narrow nationalism, and fanning it further. This complicates the position of the UNP and Ranil Wickremesinghe in pursuing any genuine reconciliation efforts.

Equally divided is the Sri Lankan Tamil community itself. The demise of the LTTE has not necessarily brought the Sri Lankan Tamil political leadership together.

Externally for Sri Lanka, the return of Rajapaksa would strengthen Colombo-Beijing vector, impinging on the Colombo-New Delhi vector. This

could have been prevented last time, had Colombo and New Delhi worked together to take the bilateral relations to a level different from 2015. This failure would come back to haunt both, post-2020 elections in Sri Lanka.

This may not happen if firstly, a miracle happens within Sri Lanka, resulting in Rajapaksa not returning to power; or, the two major communities (Sinhala and Tamil) coming together to chart a new future. Secondly, New Delhi understands the complexities in all four vectors and takes proactive steps, prioritises and balances the interactions between the two countries.

While the first one may not be in India's hands, the second one is.

