



## SHIFTING TRENDS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND PROSPECTS: ANALYSING INDIA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS IN THE POST-LTTE PERIOD

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### ABSTRACT

India's central position and geo-strategic location in South Asia plays a significant role in determining its foreign policy towards neighbouring countries and vice versa. In this perspective, India-Sri Lanka relations are not different. The issue of Tamil ethnic minority has remained a major contested issue between them. In 2009, Sri Lankan government successfully concluded the war against LTTE by the military offence; social, economic, political and security issues remained unaddressed. The Tamil Nadu politics also play an important role in determining of bilateral relations between two countries. Besides, the growing role of extra-regional powers in Sri Lanka, cause apprehensions for India in the various dimensions. India's absence during the final war against LTTE in Sri Lanka created a vacuum filled by China. Considerably, during Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime, India-Sri Lanka relations remained unfriendly due to his inclination towards China. However, Maithiripala Sirisena became a president in 2015, selected India as his first official trip created a new chapter in India-Sri Lanka relations. Substantially, four agreements were also signed in which nuclear cooperation became remarkable as it selected India over Pakistan and China. It followed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who became the first Prime Minister to visit Jaffna in 28 years after Rajiv Gandhi. It shows the major shifts and transformations in India-Sri Lanka relations. Therefore, this paper tries to find out major shifts and trends in India-Sri Lanka relations. It also focuses on transformations occurred particularly in the post-LTTE period. Finally, it gives more emphasis to the issue of divergence and convergence between two countries to develop prospects for shaping their bilateral relations in an effective manner to reduce the presence of extra-regional powers.

**KEYWORDS:** India-Sri Lanka, Trends, Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, Post-LTTE Period, Extra-regional powers.

### INTRODUCTION :

India-Sri Lanka shares common historical ties, civilisation and cultural values. Besides, the geographical proximity and ethnic ties also help to bring them more closely. Nonetheless, they have experienced many ups and downs in their bilateral relations over a period of time. Consequently, both the countries adopted different foreign policies towards each other. It is a fact that India has been seen as a potential threat for Sri Lanka's sovereignty which pushed the island nation towards approaching the extra-regional powers. Sri Lanka's signing of a defence pact with the United Kingdom during independence makes it more visible. De Silva (2017) argues that Sri Lanka's choice to ally with Britain was based on its threat perception against India. Further, the author opines that such a move of Sri Lanka was a strategic calculation to balance the threat against regional hegemony (De Silva 2017: 3). In South Asia, Sri Lanka is the only country apart from India who has a long culture of civilian government which is directly elected by the people. However, the

unequal treatment of the Indian Tamil minority by the majority Sinhalese community damaged the image of Sri Lanka as a representative democracy (Mazumdar 2015). However, to resolve the issues in a constructive way, both the countries followed various approaches. The signing of 1987 accord under which sending Indian Peace Keeping Force has turned into one of the major set back into two countries. Consequently, the two countries suffered in their bilateral relations due to differences over Tamil minority issues and different perception on nation building process, developed misunderstandings and mistrust towards each other (Murthy 2000).

### FOREIGN POLICY OF INDIA AND SRI LANKA

Michael (2013) argues that every country is a product of its own history and experience. The way it behaves is moulded by the way it came into being. India's freedom was the result of one of the most profoundly ethical and visionary struggles that history has witnessed and the principles of our foreign policy came to be moulded by that experience (Michael 2013: 32). Since independence, Sri Lanka, like most of other neighbouring countries of India, realised the importance of its relationship with India. But, at the same point, it has been suspicious about New Delhi's authoritarian trends in the region. Therefore, Colombo has often wanted to balance the relationship by approaching the countries that have antagonistic relation with India (Crisis Group 2011: 14).

India's absence in the Sri Lanka's final war against LTTE generated a favourable environment for China to enter into the ground. The China's support and assistance given to Sri Lanka during war helped to acquire a strategic space and credibility in Sri Lanka. China's larger portion of trade passes through the sea lanes in Indian Ocean provides an opportunity to strengthen its position. In this aspect, Sri Lanka has also not remained into disadvantageous position. Because, sophisticated arms and ammunitions, diplomatic support extended by China as reward for the strategic concessions makes Sri Lanka highly important. China also encouraged Pakistan to train Sri Lankan Air Force pilots and supply the smaller arms to Sri Lanka during the war against LTTE. Evidently, China sold Jian-7 fighters, anti-aircraft guns and JY-11 3D air surveillance radars to the Sri Lankan army and Pakistan supported with the small arm supplies (Sahu 2016).

### ROLE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

Inframing of India's foreign policy towards Sri Lanka and vice versa, domestic politics has an immense role. During the 1990s, New Delhi's influence over Sri Lanka declined due to dispatch of the IPKF. The failure of IPKF followed by assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, India declared LTTE as a terrorist organisation and pulled out its overall support. Afterwards, India followed a 'hands off policy' towards Sri Lanka. But, during the final stage of civil war, Sri Lanka approached towards India for its support to counter LTTE. India played a covert role due to the pressure from domestic politics. As a result, China and Pakistan became major provider of war weapons and financial help to Sri Lanka over India (Destradi 2012). The inter-party rivalry has been the major factor of Tamil Nadu's engagement in Sri Lanka's politics. Throughout the 1980s, both AIADMK and DMK supported rival Tamil militant groups in Sri Lanka. Particularly, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) was supported by the DMK. On the other side, LTTE was backed by the AIADMK which remained as the head of state government for long decade, secured better position to support the militant group (ICG 2011: 15).

However, in the post-LTTE period, changing nature of politics and economic situation in Sri Lanka creates opportunity for the investment in various fields (Sharma 2014). It has more options when it comes to economic, military and political assistance. The global shifts in the area of economic and political power have allowed Sri Lanka not only to play China against India but also to turn towards other countries for support. As a result, New Delhi and Western countries have lost their influence in Sri Lanka (Crisis Group 2011: 14).

Gaining new friends, Colombo became less dependent on India and western donor for its development and security assistance. Under the Rajapaksh regime, he adopted secretive, militarised and ethnically biased approach in rebuilding the northern and eastern region. Consequently, India's incapability

to bring devolution of power, security of civilians during the war, and the post-war reconstruction damaged India's credibility not only in Tamil Nadu but also among the Sri Lankan Tamils (Reghunathan M Ibid : 36).

Though, the relationship of India-Sri Lanka improved under the Sirisena government but addressing the issue of devolution of power and peace and reconciliation would prove their relationship in the real sense. Devolution of power has remained a disputed issue in Sri Lanka's political history since independence. The interrelated nature of development and devolution of power with the ethnic equations remained a major obstacle in its progress. However, the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, originated from the linguistic concern (Rajagopalan 2016: 131).

### SHIFTING TRENDS

In India-Sri Lanka relations China has become a key concern in post-LTTE period. In the areas of economic, political and security China's active involvement in Sri Lanka perceived by India as unfavourable gestures for its security. To protect its interests, highest levels engagement with Sri Lanka becomes a prior concern. In this aspect, recent visit of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi to Sri Lanka, seems to be a major shift to the previous approach (Padmaja 2015). Sri Lanka as a smaller country concerned for various potential threats which includes possible re-emergence of terrorism, rise of other extremist groups, deepening ethnic divisions and communal violence, challenges of maritime security, rising of organised crime, foreign interference in domestic issues in the post-LTTE period. From this point of view, India's effective role in such situations provides opportunities to re-establish their friendly relations and keep the extra-regional powers within their own sphere of influence (Kumar 2015).

However, the visit of Indian prime minister after 28 years appears to be a new approach and a balanced foreign policy in the making in both New Delhi and Colombo could push the two countries into a new level of partnership particularly from a strategic point of view (Rajagopalan 2016: 136). The situation has completely changed under the Modi government as it has a strong government based on the majority, not subjected to face pressures from the coalition politics.

### ROLE OF EXTRA-REGIONAL POWERS

According to a prominent Indian analyst Brahma Chellaney, in Sri Lanka, India has allowed itself to become a marginal player despite its geostrategic advantage and trade and investment clout (ICG 2011: 15). China sees Sri Lanka as an important hub for its maritime silk road. However, China's active engagements in the area of infrastructure development, trade, economic assistance, oil exploration and diplomatic support particularly on human rights issue in the post-LTTE era, shows Sri Lanka's significance for achieving its national interests. Prominently, Chinese investments to the strategically situated deep sea Hambantota port which both Sri Lanka and China considered to be a commercial use.

The other projects such as two phase coal power plant in Norochcholai, Katunayake-Colombo Expressway, Maththala Airport, Colombo South Harbour Expansion Project and the Centre for Performing Arts in Colombo are the major infrastructural developments of China in Sri Lanka. The strategic implications for India have gained the India's attentions towards it. However, the harbour which strategically located not only for Chinese merchant vessels and cargo exporters sailing to and from Africa and the Middle East use for the stopover, but it can also be used for the purpose of military use. China's strong foothold in Hambantota would provide to have dominance over a wide area of the Indian Ocean. Because, for China it would become easier to monitor all ships, military or non-military transports between east and west coasts of India encircling Sri Lanka (Sahu 2016).

### ECONOMIC DIMENSION

In South Asia, Sri Lanka has become India's biggest trading partner and similarly India also became largest global partner of Sri Lanka (Ministry of External Affairs 2014). After signing the Free Trade Agreement, economic relations have been increased between them. During the civil war period, Sri Lanka directed its economic relations more towards the international community which continued in the post-civil

war period unchangeably. Substantially, the civil war not significantly affected the economic relations of India and Sri Lanka. China's growing activities in Sri Lanka such as signing of agreement in 2007, provides 85 percent fund for the development of Hambantota port reduces Sri Lanka's dependency over India (Destradi 2010).

The three decade of war has brought down the Sri Lanka's economy. The post-civil period marks the fastest recovery of Sri Lanka's economy and in the year 2010, Sri Lanka reached to highest economic growth since beginning of the civil war in 2002 with the growth rate of 8.2 (Kumar 2014). The Hambantota port, proposed by China to construct in Sri Lanka, which is likely to grow as the major commercial port in Sri Lanka in the near future. Both India and Sri Lanka have experienced in the past taught them many lessons. As a result, currently they have started considering the concerns of each other. During the visit of Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe, from Sri Lanka to India, he proposed Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) with India.

The antagonistic experience of India in the final moment of signing of CEPA agreement with Sri Lanka in 2008 prevented India to initiate any such idea. In contrast, present government of Sri Lanka wants to develop economic ties particularly with the four states of South India in which Tamil Nadu state is also included. It shows the major transformation in the relations of two countries which weakens the fear of Sri Lanka about India's supremacy in contemporary period (Balachandran 2016).

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION**

India-Sri Lanka shares, more than 2500 years old cultural ties. The religion of Buddhism has travelled to Sri Lanka only through India. However, discriminative policy followed by Sinhalese majority towards Tamil ethnic minorities disturbed the long sharing cultural relations of two countries. In the final stage of civil war, many Tamil minorities severely affected which made them more vulnerable. The humanitarian crisis like, internally displacement of people, migration, issue of war convicts, rehabilitations of ex-combatants still remains unsettled. India has pursued various policies towards Sri Lanka to resolve the issue of Tamil ethnic minorities and their historical grievances but not succeeded (Aliff 2014).

Sri Lanka has not achieved security and peace despite countering LTTE during Rajapakshe regime. The government has shown its inability or reluctance to bring out the political solution for the Tamil minorities and their issue remains unresolved. Also, deployment of security forces, extensive powers of search, arrest and sieging of property, eight months secret detention of the individual, followed during his tenure. It extended instability within the Sri Lankan society which has directly affected India with the influx of refugee (Chellaney 2010). During Srisena's visit to India, both countries committed for the cooperation of peaceful use of nuclear energy. The area focuses by the present agreement include sharing of knowledge and resource; provide training to the peaceful use of nuclear energy; cooperation to radioactive waste management and to mitigate possible catastrophes. They have also focused to cooperate in cultural field which confined time frame of 2015-18.

In addition, the agreement intends to enhance cooperation in the various fields such as performing arts, library accessibility, archives, exchange of experts and publications etc. Further, the problems confronted by Indian fishermen in Palk Strait by Sri Lankan Navy that comprises firing, imprisoning of Indian fisherman for using mechanised trawlers and illegal fishing practices. In this matter, leaders from both countries decided to follow 'constructive and humanitarian' method to address the issue. They also decided to inspire dialogues between the fishermen from both the countries (Nataraj and Sekhani 2015). The common historical relations pushed forward for the cooperation of both the countries in the field of security, development, communication, trade and commerce to protect their national interests in the Indian Ocean predominantly (Hariharan 2014).

### **POLITICAL DIMENSION**

The invitation of newly elected prime minister, Modi to all head of the states from SAARC countries for his swearing in ceremony marks the changing scenario of Indian politics. The present

government is majority in the centre provides favourable condition to formulate its foreign policy. Particularly, in the perspective of Sri Lanka, the dominant role of domestic politics in the India's foreign policy towards Sri Lanka seems to be reduced in the current phase of India-Sri Lanka relations. Both the countries agreed for cooperation in the post-conflict reconstruction and participation in the regional arrangements (Chand 2010).

As far as the reconciliation process is concerned, the Sirisena government has created an important space for the UNHRC resolution that need to be followed as he recognises the process of reconciliation first needs accountability of the war crimes, corruption and misuse of power (Keenan 2016). The previous regime provided China a strategic space which played major role in Sri Lanka and reduced India's leverage. Also, his two brothers controlled the important ministries like finance and internal security, defence and urban development, provided to China immense benefit to expand its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia. During the visit of Chinese president, Xi to the Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2014, both Sri Lanka and Maldives have shown their interests for joining the MSR proposal (Hariharan 2015).

After the regime change in Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka's president, Maithiripala Srisena's visit to as his first foreign tour, changed the declining bilateral relationship of India and Sri Lanka. During his fruitful visit, four agreements were signed by India and Sri Lanka likely to provide opportunity in the area of cooperation and strengthening their bilateral relations (Ramachandran 2015).

### SECURITY DIMENSION

The security trends of South Asia are not static in nature. During the Cold War period, involvement of extra-regional powers in South was the key concern of India. To avoid such involvement, India followed Non-alignment policy. But, Pakistan's engagement with the US compelled India to turn its policy towards Soviet Union. Sri Lanka also supported India's policy of Non-Alignment in the Cold War period, but the issue of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka minimised India's leverage in Sri Lanka. India was mostly worried about the US involvement in Sri Lanka's Trincomalee harbour as it was not in favour to allow the external powers within the region of South Asia (Jain 2011).

Also, after military defeat of LTTE, Sri Lanka looked towards the world's power on UNHRC resolution passed against Sri Lanka was supported by China and Russia whereas India signed this resolution under pressure of the internal politics. It created negative impression of India among the majority Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka. India deeply concerned for the stable and unified Sri Lanka because of the presence of foreign powers within the country. Sri Lanka's increasing ties with China and Pakistan particularly in military and strategic spheres, its strategic proximity to external powers raise security concern for India (Sikri 2009).

Security cooperation in post-26/11 between India-Sri Lanka which includes maritime security, trilateral agreement with India-Sri Lanka and Maldives to secure Indian Ocean in 2013. The strategic and security interests of India-Sri Lanka are mutually interdependent and interlocking. Sri Lanka's geo-strategic location increases its vital importance in the area of trade. Also, visits of the Naval and Coast guard Ships from different countries in the world recognise it as the organising centre. Presently, The Colombo port deals with the approximately 70 percent of vessel transshipment and in the past few years around 95 foreign warships has visited the port from all over the world (Singh 2016).

Sri Lanka's approval for visiting Chinese submarine and warship frequently, raise security concern for India (Aneez and Sirilal 2014). In the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has occupied a strategic position in terms of the security of India and South Asia. The present government of Sri Lanka had suspended the Chinese project of Colombo port development on the temporary basis, to analyse its impact on the environmental issues. It was approved by the former government in the 2014.

Finally, after the recommendation by the environment impact assessment (EIA) and the cabinet committee on economic management the project has resumed by China in Sri Lanka. This is one of the biggest and only foreign investments received by Sri Lanka from any country. Also, location of this project helps to connect with the business community of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Middle East The ruling

government of Sri Lanka follows the balanced approach towards both India and Sri Lanka unlike previous government. In addition, US also become prior to Sri Lanka which was ignored during Rajapakshe government given more space to China (Qingyun 2016).

In the other words, China has become Sri Lanka's "all time friend" in the post-LTTE period. Further, the mutual interests and geo-strategic importance of Sri Lanka in developing MSR strengthen their bilateral relations. Sri Lanka's closer relations with China mostly depend to its non-interference policy. China's favour to Sri Lanka on UNHRC resolution whereas India's support to the international community against Sri Lanka's interests enabled China-Sri Lanka ties extensively. China's growing engagement with Sri Lanka mostly trade and diplomatic relations, imagined as the threat for the India's strategic interests in near future (Hariharan 2014).

In the same way, Sri Lanka also perceived security concern from India. The Sri Lanka's perception comprises, India's development of INS Arihant within the domain of neighbouring country; first Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) which is an investigation satellite launched by India in 2009 and again in the year of 2013 and 2015, the two military communications satellites launched by India. The Regional Navigation Satellite System launched by India in 2013, also intended for the military use according to some experts (Abeyagoonasekera 2016). These developments cause security concern for Sri Lanka.

### TRANSFORMATIONS

Factually, India-Sri Lanka relations have experienced troubles, numerous controversies and highly apprehensive towards each other. Sri Lanka always perceived India's dominion nature as threat for its sovereignty. But, after regime change in Sri Lanka, new thinking has been evolving which creates possibilities for both the countries to come together. Considerably, during the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe's visit to India the signing of Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) has been offered by him. It signals as the changing perception of both the countries towards each other. Because, the antagonistic experience of India in the final moment of signing the CEPA agreement with Sri Lanka in 2008, prevented India to initiate any such idea. In contrast, present government of Sri Lanka also wants to develop economic ties particularly with the four states of South India in which Tamil Nadu state is also included. It shows the major transformation in the relations of two countries which weakens the fear of Sri Lanka about India's supremacy in contemporary period (Balachandran 2016).

The end of such a long ethnic conflict of LTTE in 2009 marked not only as a new era in Sri Lanka, but provided an opportunity for re-orientation of the foreign policy of both the countries. Also, opened up a new chapter to improve long hostile relations existing between them (Jain 2011). It shows that the India-Sri Lanka relations have been transformed in the post-LTTE period as various incidents took place in this time. There are contributing factors in order to transforming the India-Sri Lanka relations provide advantage and disadvantage simultaneously. The defeat of LTTE, regime change in India and Sri Lanka, active role of extra-regional powers can be identified as the contributing factors. Presently, India can play a significant role in resolving the issues remain between them which were limited during the LTTE period.

The trust deficit has also been reduced to some extent, creates more opportunities in the area of economic development. The fishermen dispute emerged as a major threat for the employment of Fishermen from both the countries needs an immediate attention. Recently, both the countries agreed to resolve the issue in an earliest manner and formed a committee in this direction. The high officials from both the countries met on November 05, 2016 and ministerial level talk held in New Delhi. In the meeting, officials from both the countries shared views for the long term solution of fishermen problems.

They have reached to the agreement for establishing a joint working group (JWG) on fisheries to meet in every three months. Further, the ministerial level meeting decided for every six months the delegations consists of representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Coast Guard and Navies from India and Sri Lanka. The date and place for the first ministerial meeting was also decided that is January 02, 2017 in Colombo (Ministry of External Affairs 2016).

## CONCLUSION

India and Sri Lanka has changed their approaches towards each other over a period of time or in the different occasions. Apart from this, the prevalence of security perceptions and differences over many issues prevented them from maintaining a friendly bilateral relationship. In the post-LTTE period, the relations between two countries marked as unfriendly particularly under Rajapakse regime. Also, new security developments emerged in the two countries. In this context, the emergence of new security trends between two countries has been identified as existing of authoritative government in Sri Lanka based on centralised power, vast militarisation in northern and eastern part of Sri Lanka, devolution of power, unresolved issues of Human Rights violations, suspicious approach towards Tamil minorities and promotion of Sinhalisation etc. Above all, Considering China as true friend of Sri Lanka over India, concern over Trincomalee harbour, Hambantota port, maritime security and the process of reconciliation and rehabilitation has created new security challenges and concerns for India in the present scenario. However, Sri Lanka's effort towards developing a new constitution to ensure equal rights for all the communities in Sri Lanka is still remained under process which shows the positive developments has taken place between two countries in the post-LTTE period. Significantly, addressing to the issues which are contested between them through the mutually agreed solution from both the sides became essential. Therefore, focusing on win-win situation for both the countries to explore geostrategic significance and develop the strong bilateral relations became need of hour.

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