

Leadership impact on India -Sri Lanka Strategic Security Dynamics

R HARIHARAN

Strategic power equation in the region

South Asia and Indian Ocean Region have come under increasing focus of strategic community with the rise of China and its impact on the power equation evolving in the Asia-Pacific region. During the last two decades the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has improved qualitatively in command and control and joint operations involving land, air and naval forces supported by giant strides made in space technology and the use of C4I systems. Technological improvements in design and manufacture of ballistic missiles, submarines and surface ships aided by an increasing cyber warfare capability have enabled the PLA navy to become a modern and ambitious naval force to look beyond East and South China seas to extend China's power assertion.

The U.S. has recast its strategic calculus to consider Asia-Pacific as a single region to include Indian Ocean countries. The U.S. has tried to build a structured strategic relation with India which has the size, economic growth, military power and influence to counter China's power assertion at least in South Asia and Indian Ocean. Though India has positively responded to the U.S. overtures it has limited it to promote better strategic understanding. It has shown that it does not consider its relations with the U.S. and China as a zero sum game. Though the U.S. initially had some reservations on this count, it appears to have come round

to understand its relevance in maintaining peace and harmony between the two giant neighbours.

The rise of China as a potential super power with economic and military power to dominate not only East Asia but also the Indian Ocean region is a reality both India and China recognise. However, China's increasing footprints in all South Asian countries including India and Sri Lanka makes it difficult for them to decide their strategic options. This was evident during the Eelam War when China met Sri Lanka's military needs which could not be met by India due to its internal compulsions. Such awkward situations are likely to become even more difficult when Chinese economic clout comes into full play both in India and Sri Lanka as well as the Indian Ocean.

Strategic convergence

Understanding Sri Lanka's emerging security dynamics will help India shape its foreign policy to preserve its national interests in tune with the realities of changing power equation in the region and design its strategic security architecture. The same holds true for Sri Lanka as well. India has dominated Sri Lanka's strategic security options positively as well as negatively. In recent years, Sri Lanka has taken note of India's rapid economic growth and increasing global influence and tried to advantageously use it to build its strategic linkages with India and India has welcomed it.

Sri Lanka's physical contiguity to India's peninsular South and location overlooking Indian Ocean sea lanes make a strong case to consider India and Sri Lanka as two parts of a single strategic entity. Perhaps this was the reason historically people of the two nations maintained a win-win relationship despite the latent fear of Sri Lankans' natural fear of being overwhelmed by its huge neighbour.

The complex security equation between the two countries came into full play during the last three decades when Sri Lanka struggled to come to terms with a Tamil separatist insurgency spawned by unfulfilled aspirations of the Tamil minority. India's intervention between 1983 and 1991 in the island nation underlined the importance attached by India to bilateral relations with Sri Lanka. After the hiccups generated in the wake of Indian intervention, there is greater understanding now than ever before between the two nations at the strategic security level.

However President Rajapaksa's assertive leadership which contributed to victory in war has impacted the post-war recovery of Sri Lanka. There is an

increasing consensus in India and the Western world including the U.S. that the elected democracy in Sri Lanka is being turned into an authoritarian regime where a highly popular President has established firm control over all the three pillars of democracy – legislature, executive, and judiciary.

This has given him confidence to act in a cavalier manner affecting good governance, rule of law and fundamental freedom of the people. More importantly for India the ethnic reconciliation process is yet to achieve a win-win situation; this could affect New Delhi's coalition politics which needs the support of Tamil Nadu's regional parties.

Sri Lanka's strategic security dynamics is driven by both internal and external issues. Internally, President Rajapaksa's leadership and governance, the unfinished ethnic reconciliation process, and the role of armed forces are some of the important issues. External drivers include Rajapaksa's world view, China's power projection, Tamil Diaspora and resurgence of separatism, and the India factor to include trade, and the role of Tamil Nadu.

Internal drivers

President Mahinda Rajapaksa achieved success in the seemingly impossible task of totally eliminating Velupillai Prabhakaran-led Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. They had held the country to ransom for 26 years and warded off three earlier attempts of the Sri Lankan army to defeat them. They had eluded peace overtures of earlier presidents with the same aplomb they showed in war.

Rajapaksa showed a lot of clarity of objective in choosing to militarily eliminate them rather than talk to them on unacceptable terms. Even his detractors have to concede that his strong leadership skill led to his success. So it is not surprising that many Sri Lankans, particularly Southern Sinhals, consider Rajapaksa a modern-day Dutugemunu, the legendary Sinhala king who defeated the Tamil king Elara ending his 35-year rule.

For the first time in three decades Sri Lanka has emerged as a strong and self-confident nation with a strong and large army. However, Sri Lanka paid a huge price for its victory against Tamil separatists. Over the years it lost 24,000 soldiers and about 80,000 civilians while over 27,000 LTTE cadres perished. Most of those killed were in the productive age group. Apart from the human cost,

Internally, President Rajapaksa's leadership and governance, the unfinished ethnic reconciliation process, and the role of armed forces are some of the important issues.

Though infrastructure and energy structures have been developed fundamental issues essential to strengthen the nation remain unaddressed. Under Rajapaksa's leadership political expedience to centralise power in the hands of a few has become the top priority.

the wars destroyed millions of rupees' worth of infrastructure of all kinds, public resources, businesses, and thousands of habitations. In its wake the war has left the northern part of the nation devastated with nearly ten percent of the population recovering from the trauma of war.

Logically, Sri Lanka's foremost strategic priority should be to redesign its political and social architecture to prevent a recurrence of Tamil minority separatism once again. In short, the task now is to build a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka where a Sinhala majority and other minorities live as equal partners and enjoy a win-win relationship. Though it is nearly four years since the war ended this onerous task remains incomplete. The dividends of peace continue to remain elusive. The statement of Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister Don Stephen Senanayake at the time of independence that "freedom was obtained to reduce sorrow and increase happiness" quoted by President Rajapaksa in his latest Independence Day speech continues to be only a homily for many.

Three decades of ethnic confrontation and war have created structural and functional weaknesses in governance like restoring rule of law, safeguarding human rights, assuring fundamental freedoms of citizens and free expression. As a result state and legislative structures have been weakened by aberrations in governance, lack of accountability at all levels, cronyism and endemic corruption. These have affected the quality of life of the people and weakened the economy.

Rajapaksa has shown he is a hands-on President. If used to fulfil a larger vision, this quality is an asset in conducting war as well as in achieving results in peace. However, he has used it to centralise power in his hands; his perspective, worldview and style of functioning has come to be accepted norm for the government, sidelining checks and balances built in parliament and state apparatus.

Though infrastructure and energy structures have been developed fundamental issues essential to strengthen the nation remain unaddressed. Under Rajapaksa's leadership political expedience to centralise power in the hands of a few has become the top priority. Overt and covert suppression of fundamental freedoms by the state continues. Media operates in an environment

of intimidation and intolerance. Dissenters are roughed up or even killed. Coercive use of legal provisions and gross violation of human rights go on unchecked. And Tamils have started losing faith that the Rajapaksa government would meet their long held aspirations of equitable status despite the heavy loss of life and material the nation has suffered.

Rajapaksa is an adroit politician. His predecessors worked on the basic premise that the LTTE's separatist insurgency was a product of the Tamil ethnic struggle for autonomy. But Rajapaksa saw the LTTE merely as a terrorist outfit that subjugated Tamil people. This notion while shocking the liberal segments of the country found widespread acceptance among the people who were reluctant to put up with any more years of privation and insecurity. The Army also welcomed Rajapaksa's ascent as his goal ending the peace process 2002 and eliminating the LTTE rather than talking to them appealed to them. He endeared himself to the troops as he allowed the conduct of military operations without interruption and equipped the troops to fight and win many a battle.

The first thing Rajapaksa did after winning the war was to use his immense national popularity to get elected for a second term as President in 2010. He also used it to strengthen the powerbase of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition to secure an unprecedented two-thirds majority in the parliament. This freed him from parliamentary pinpricks and enabled him to do amend the Constitutional provisions that restricted anyone to hold the office of President to only two terms.

President Rajapaksa brooks no opposition. After winning the war, he advanced the Presidential election by one year to 2010 to cash in on his immense popularity. When opposition parties chose General Sarath Fonseka, the national hero who as army commander led the SLA to victory as their consensus candidate to challenge Rajapaksa, the government pitched in to systematically destroy the image of Fonseka with allegations of a whole range of misconduct. Even as the voting was ending, Fonseka was prosecuted on charges of corruption, meddling in politics while in service, and plotting to overthrow the government. He was deprived of his military rank and was sentenced to imprisonment.

Rajapaksa managed to emasculate opposition parties by encouraging defections to UPFA ranks with lure of office and attractive appointments even during his first term. Now the UPFA coalition is a motley collection of 17 parties of different sizes, hues, agendas, and beliefs. It has on the one extreme the ultra right wing Jathiya Hela Urumaya (JHU), self styled protectors of Buddhism, and at the other end the ultra left Jathika Nihasa Peramuna (National Freedom Front - NFF).

To keep the flock happy, President Rajapaksa has appointed over 100 ministers of various grades and other office holders of different government bodies from all coalition partners so that every second UPFA parliament member has a personal stake in the power structure. So it is not ideology, but political power that is the strong point of the UPFA. Political horse trading for power rather than principles has generally become *de rigueur* of their conduct. This has played havoc with the quality of governance as government escapes critical parliamentary and civil society.

Mahinda Rajapaksa has been in power for the last eight years and will be ruling Sri Lanka till 2016, when the next Presidential elections are due. He may well be elected for one or more terms as the limitation clause for the Presidential terms in the Constitution is no more there. As Executive President he wields enormous power with minimal accountability to parliament. He will be at the centre of the entire strategic security policy making. With Rajapaksa running the country with his two brothers – Basil and Gotabaya – in charge of national development and defence respectively and his other brother Chamal Rajapaksa as the speaker of the parliament, decision making will be a closed affair lacking critical scrutiny.

Tamil ethnic reconciliation

India had been relying on President Rajapaksa's promises on devolution of powers to Tamil minority. His political and developmental philosophy contained in the 2004 election manifesto *Mahinda Chintana*, however, does not recognise devolution of powers to ethnic minority. This was against one of the fundamentals of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement 1987 (ISLA). The 13th Amendment (13A) to the Constitution came in the wake of the ISLA to create provincial councils to give a measure of autonomy to Tamils. However, it was never implemented fully. India presumably in its anxiety to get rid of the LTTE influence in the region, went along with Rajapaksa and accepted his promise to complete the devolution of powers to Tamils after the war and extended support to him though it faced political flak in Tamil Nadu.

Though Rajapaksa continued to promise implementation of the 13A after the war also, he never did it. He used political subterfuges one after the other to buy time. Much to India's embarrassment in his Independence Day speech on February 4, 2013 Rajapaksa said "it is not practical for this country to be divided based on ethnicity. The solution is to live together in this country with equal rights for all communities." This makes it clear that he would not be fully implementing the 13A.

Rajapaksa had stalled the ethnic reconciliation process for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier he had no faith in 13A or in a federal solution for the ethnic issue. The second reason is his reluctance to negotiate with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which had emerged as the largest elected representative of Tamils in North and East. TNA's tainted association with the LTTE and insistence on devolution of federal powers and recognition of Tamil homeland were anathema to Southern Sinhala sentiments. TNA is likely to secure majority of the seats when Northern provincial council elections are held in September 2013. However, he is averse to have TNA in the saddle in the province.

Sri Lankan armed forces

After the Eelam War Sri Lankan armed forces have become a strong force capable of planning and executing complex operations involving many formations and forces on multiple axes. The army is about 170,000-strong, organised in 19 divisions and some independent brigades. The divisions are smaller than Indian infantry divisions, with fewer supporting arms.

The navy though small was employed very imaginatively to cripple LTTE's rogue tramp ships which transported arms and equipment to the LTTE areas. It has now emerged as a professional navy largely to defend Sri Lanka coastlines. The air force has limited lift capability; it showed its ability to work in tandem with the army and caused severe damage to LTTE defences. It also used its limited capability to acquire real time information before and during the war. Sri Lanka also effectively networked with India during the war and benefitted from information inputs from India and the U.S.

India as a strategic partner of Sri Lanka has immensely contributed to the training and development of Sri Lanka army. For a number of years India had extended training facilities to Sri Lanka in almost all training establishments. There are regular meetings at senior defence bureaucracy as well as service chiefs' level. In recent years it is training over 2000 military personnel a year. In particular, the training of naval and air force personnel has been upgraded. Though India's training of Sri Lankan soldiers had recently come under flak it is likely to continue in the larger strategic interests.

India recently helped Sri Lanka to establish its first ever military intelligence school. In September-November 2011, the two countries held their first major naval combat exercise "SLINEX-11" in six years, with a total of 16 warships off Trincomalee. The Indian Navy, in recent times, has also done hydrographic surveys and salvage operations for Sri Lanka. Indian Navy and Coast Guard

also participate in trilateral Indian Ocean cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Indian Navy also protects the Indian Ocean economic zones of the two smaller neighbours. Even after nearly four years since the Eelam War ended 70 infantry battalions - that is 70 per cent of the infantry strength of the army - continue to be deployed in Northern and Eastern provinces. With the reconciliation process with the Tamils making little process, the dominant and visible presence of army has added to the feeling of insecurity among the population recovering from the trauma of war. It has also become a controversial national political issue with international ramifications. This issue could gather more mass as parties are gearing up for the first ever Northern Provincial Council elections scheduled to be held in September 2013.

In the Northern Province the army continues to occupy vast swathes of land either for reasons of security or for the use of troops deployed in the region. Even where such lands have been released to the owners, in the absence of ownership records the owners have not been able to establish their claims. Most of the troops in the north are deployed in demining and reconstruction work which are skilled and semi skilled jobs. However, such deployment would help them regroup to help in internal security situation as and when they arise.

LTTE ceased to be a national threat as it has no foothold within the country. Nearly 40 percent of the troops inducted after 2004 had undergone shortened training. They require intense training to make them truly professional. This was acknowledged by Army Commander Lt Gen Jagath Jayasuriya immediately on taking over as Army Commander. In spite of this their current deployment shows training is not SLA's first priority.

The deployments also indicate securing vulnerable coastal areas in Jaffna peninsula, along Mannar and Wannai coastline and Northern Batticaloa coastal areas. Presumably, troops are deployed to take on to thwart any attempted infiltration by pro-LTTE elements by sea, particularly from Tamil Nadu. This would also explain Sri Lanka Navy enforcing zero tolerance for TN fishing boats intruding into Mannar waters.

Sri Lankan army deployment is probably based on the worst-case scenario of LTTE revival and infiltration back to Sri Lanka from overseas pockets. This apparently keeps alive the paranoia about the revival of the LTTE to justify the army's sizeable presence in the North. Army has a tight grip, though some of it informal, in the Northern Province.

Northern Province is the stronghold of the TNA which had associated with separatist elements and the LTTE in the past. It receives financial support from

the Diaspora and its ranks include leaders who still talk of Tamil Eelam rather than accepting the ground reality. Evidently the army's intrusive deployment discourages unfettered political activity of the TNA. At the same time the army had tried to soften its image by recruiting over 100 ex-LTTE women cadres in the army women's wing. The mysterious abductions and killing of former fellow travellers of LTTE allegedly by military intelligence agents has created a sense of insecurity in Jaffna.

In the rest of the country also there are some disturbing signs of politicisation of the army, employment on civilian jobs and normal development tasks which have an underlying tendency towards militarisation. The President's vindictive handling of General Sarath Fonseka caused some unrest within the army ranks; however, after his handpicked officer Lt General Jagat Jayasuriya took over as army commander, personnel sympathetic to General Fonseka have been weeded out the army. Now President Rajapaksa probably commands the personal loyalty of commanders, who have been carefully chosen by him. This was evident in the run-up to the Presidential poll when the army commander and senior officers publicly came out in his support.

The subtle politicisation of army has the potential to emerge as an extra power centre in the country. Under ambitious commanders such a power centre outside the democratic sphere could become an extra-political loose cannon.

External drivers

Rajapaksa's relations with the US and the West – particularly UK, Canada and the EU – had been troubled from the beginning because of human rights aberrations and kidnappings reported in the period preceding the war. They also did not go with his walk out of the Peace Process 2002. But the relations turned more abrasive when the U.S. suggested readiness to send U.S. Marines to evacuate the LTTE leadership trapped in the last stages of war in April 2009. Though Sri Lanka refused the suggestion (with India's support), the U.S.'s agenda has become suspect ever since.

Now foreign conspiracy to denigrate Sri Lanka has become an important rallying call for UPFA leaders. This has triggered Sinhala nationalism bordering on chauvinism. Though repeatedly Rajapaksas have avowed their faith in Sri

In the rest of the country also there are some disturbing signs of politicisation of the army, employment on civilian jobs and normal development tasks which have an underlying tendency towards militarisation.

Lanka's sibling relations with India, India is also likely to face the fallout of xenophobia in times of crisis.

The experience of the U.S. and the Western nations with the President on his promises made during the war to attend to their concerns on Sri Lanka's accountability on devolution of powers to Tamils' allegations of human rights violations and war crimes is no better. This has squandered the goodwill Sri Lanka enjoyed with the international community which rallied to support the Peace Process 2002.

Despite their reservations on the rationale of Rajapaksa's war against the LTTE, most of the nations including India and the U.S. extended their support to it as they expected him to keep his words. But he prevaricated and when allegations of war crimes cropped up, grudgingly he appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). But even to implement its recommendations Sri Lanka had to be hauled up before at the UN Human Rights Council. Sri Lanka is still dragging its foot once again as it is facing yet another resolution on the same issue in the UNHRC meeting in March 2013. Overall, internationally his words enjoy less credibility than ever before. The erosion of external credibility is the biggest weakness of his leadership.

As of now India and China are perhaps the last few reliable friends of Rajapaksa. However, his broken promises and indifference to India's concerns expressed in talks at the highest level have probably eroded his support in Indian political constituency. The mounting allegations with visuals of Sri Lanka's war crimes in the media have given a lease of life to pro-LTTE and pro-Eelam elements and fringe groups to expand their support base the world over including Tamil Nadu. This has serious security and political implications for India as it can allow neither an extremist nor a separatist group to increase its space in Tamil Nadu.

Revival of the call for Tamil Eelam

During the Eelam War, most of the key leaders of the LTTE were killed in the last stages of war along with Prabhakaran. Over 10,000 LTTE cadres and auxiliaries have been screened, put through a process of rehabilitation and released. Nearly 800 LTTE hard core members are still in custody and the government expects to prosecute them for their crimes against state and other criminal activities. As of now, there is no remnant of LTTE on the island; but there are strong sympathisers particularly among youth who have lost their kin. The administration is monitoring such elements and political gatherings and even private functions for signs of anti-state activity. In particular, TNA has been put under such pressure.

Though the LTTE continues to be proscribed in 32 countries including India, its overseas support elements and sympathisers among the Tamil Diaspora are largely intact. Notably the LTTE cells in Tamil Diaspora concentrations in UK, Europe particularly in Norway, France and Switzerland, the U.S., Canada and Australia have been active. Though nearly two-lakh Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are present in India, pro-LTTE activity among them is marginal.

It took a long time for the Tamil Diaspora to come to terms with the death of Prabhakaran and other leaders. But the situation is slowly changing as the Sri Lankan government's lack of sincerity and insensitiveness to Tamils plight and allegations of war crimes against Tamils have become rallying calls for Tamil Diaspora.

There are three pro-Eelam organisations operating among Tamil Diaspora. The umbrella organisation of Global Tamil Forum (GTF), formed in July 2009, and its constituent British Tamil Forum (BTF) has provided a broad based platform for all likeminded people to join hands and demand international action against the Sri Lanka government for alleged war crimes and other violations of human rights. They have been working with the Labour and Conservative Parties in UK.

Former LTTE elements overseas have formed the Tamil Eelam People's Alliance (TEPA) based in Norway, composed of LTTE leader Perinpanayagam Sivaparan alias Nediyan with members from the LTTE's overseas offices, particularly in EU, UK, Canada, and the US. They have been participating in protests organised by GTF. However, it is facing an internal power struggle led by another former LTTE leader Sekarapillai Vinayagamoorthy alias Vinayagam, a former LTTE senior intelligence leader. However, their activities are constricted due to their antecedents.

The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), formed with the objective of carrying out a democratic struggle for creating an independent Tamil Eelam, is led by Visvanathan Rudrakumaran, a US-based legal advisor of the LTTE and now "prime minister." The TGTE has offices in 12 countries, with the secretariat functioning from Geneva. The TGTE's linkages in Tamil Nadu are of special significance to India. In April 2012 the TGTE nominated five persons from Tamil Nadu as "members" of TGTE "parliament". A TGTE Solidarity Centre operates in Tamil Nadu. It has established links with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Tamil Eelam Support Organisation (TESO) revived by DMK leader M Karunanidhi last year after the DMK was routed in the Tamil Nadu assembly polls.

The Tamil Nadu leaders' support to Tamil Eelam has come in handy for overseas LTTE and Eelam fringe groups in Tamil Nadu to join their bandwagon.

The revival of support for Tamil Eelam by the DMK and its rival the All India Anna DMK led by Jayalalithaa, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, coinciding with the global steps to revive the Eelam struggle should be a matter of concern to both India and Sri Lanka. Both the parties have used widespread public indignation over the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka during the Eelam War and allegations of atrocities to muster support for their parties. The Tamil Nadu leaders' support to Tamil Eelam has come in handy for overseas LTTE and Eelam fringe groups in Tamil Nadu to join their bandwagon. It is a risky game as this could lead to legitimising the separatist cause and provide political space for clandestine revival of LTTE and Eelam separatists in Tamil Nadu.

Sri Lanka is seriously concerned at these developments. India baiters in Sri Lanka have used it to stoke anti-Indian sentiments. The Eelam bogey now taking shadowy form in Tamil Nadu suits Rajapaksa to hold on to his Southern Sinhala voters and leverage his relations with India. Apart from this it could affect the strong strategic relations existing between the two countries.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has emerged as a self-confident nation after the success in the Eelam War under President Mahinda Rajapaksa's leadership. He is immensely popular particularly among rural voters, though the intellectual class may complain about his style. There is no worthwhile opposition leader to challenge him in the near future. The Rajapaksas will be making all key decisions including those related to strategic security.

They have been selling the idea of a foreign conspiracy to deny Sri Lanka the credit for victory against Tamil terrorists and denigrate the nation by spreading allegations of war crimes. These sentiments combined with the sense of triumphalism, militarism, rightwing xenophobia are likely to be used by Sri Lanka to gather support against any international effort to improve accountability and governance.

President Rajapaksa's actions on ethnic devolution will probably be on majority Sinhala terms and not on what India and Tamils might desire. As this affects India's credibility it will have to rework its strategy to handle him on this issue. Restiveness on this subject in Tamil Nadu in convergence with an international campaign against the Rajapaksa government is likely to gather

strength to pressurise India's policy on relations with Sri Lanka. As this has security connotations for Sri Lanka, its strategic security arrangements with India run the risk of coming apart.

In Sri Lanka right-wing Buddhist elements could exploit such a development to whip up a campaign against India and threaten Indian trade and investment in Sri Lanka. A peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka would always be in India's strategic interest. It is more so when the power equation in South Asia and Indian Ocean region is in its evolutionary stage. However, if Sri Lanka's internal peace and equity issues fester they hold the potential to derail India's cordial relations with Sri Lanka in the near term due to internal political pressures from Tamil Nadu likely in the run up to 2014 parliamentary polls. In such a contingency China's presence in Sri Lanka could become a game changer. With increasing Chinese influence, Sri Lanka has the option of seeking Chinese military assistance if and when it is required.

As of now, President Rajapaksa and Sri Lanka as a whole appear to be keen to maintain inclusive relations with India despite the growing relations with China. This suits India which has its own interest in maintaining cordial relations with China. However, India needs to show more dynamism and leadership in policy execution to assert its position as Rajapaksa responds only to assertive leadership demands.

Col **R Hariharan** (Retd) is associated with the South Asia Analysis Group and the Chennai Centre for China Studies.