

Associate Paper

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India's Strategic Vision and Sri Lanka's National Security: Looking Out Ten Years

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Key Points

- India will face three major challenges and opportunities in its relationship with Sri Lanka over the next decade: the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka, large-scale poaching in Sri Lankan waters by fishermen from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and the “China factor”.
- On the first issue, the challenge for India will be to insulate its Sri Lanka policy from the influence of Tamil Nadu politicians. Opportunities will arise from assisting Sri Lanka in its efforts to maintain its territorial integrity.
- The challenge for India on the second issue will be to keep Indian fishing vessels from venturing into Sri Lankan waters. Co-operating with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard in enforcing maritime border security will provide an opportunity for India to deepen the relationship.
- On the third issue, coming to terms with Sri Lanka's right to an independent foreign policy – which calls for maintaining sound relations with all major powers, including China – will be the challenge for India, but its opportunities will lie in providing Sri Lanka with a close understanding of its views on the “China factor”.

Summary

From its inception on 26 January 1950, the Republic of India has possessed the strategic vision of playing a major role in Asian and world affairs. During the Cold War period, it was a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), but an extremely low economic growth rate held India back for many years. After its economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, however, the

economy began to grow much faster. While domestic economic development will remain one of India's main strategic objectives in the twenty-first century, the financial resources that it has accrued from consistent healthy annual growth rates will enable India to pursue its strategic vision in the international arena with greater vigour. India remains in contention to become a permanent member of any future reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and is an important participant in a large number of regional co-operation initiatives, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). The Indian Navy (IN) is planning to play an ever greater role in the Indian Ocean with the steady acquisition of air, surface and sub-surface assets. India envisions itself as playing a leading role in regional and, perhaps, even global strategic stability. In pursuing such an ambitious strategic vision, it would be prudent to give due importance to its immediate neighbourhood, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is doing in South Asia, including its closest maritime neighbour, Sri Lanka.

It is against this backdrop that this paper will examine the possible challenges and opportunities that India may face in its relationship with Sri Lanka over the next ten years. These will most prominently include the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka, the large scale poaching by fishermen from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Sri Lankan waters and the "China factor". To examine these issues, the paper will first look at India's strategic vision in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia. It will then consider Sri Lanka's national security, and, finally, it will attempt to identify the challenges and opportunities that India may face in its relationship with Sri Lanka over the next ten years.

Analysis

India's Strategic Vision in the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia

India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) can be derived from its policy statement, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, produced by Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy) in 2007.¹ According to the foreword to that document by then Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, New Delhi's primary national interest is to have a secure and stable strategic environment to ensure the country's continued economic development, which is needed to improve the living conditions of its masses. Its primary maritime military interest is to safeguard national security and prevent external interference so that economic growth and development can take place in a secure environment. According to Admiral Mehta, India's maritime military strategy will be underpinned by the principle of 'freedom to use the seas for national purposes under all circumstances'.² He goes on to state that:

The Indian Navy is the primary maritime means by which the state ensures the use of the sea for its own purposes, while, at the same time, ensuring that others do not use it in a manner prejudicial to its interests. The Indian Navy, by virtue of its capability,

¹ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), India, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, New Delhi, 2007. <http://www.irfc-nausena.nic.in/irfc/ezine/maritime_strat.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*

strategic positioning and robust presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), can be the catalyst for peace, tranquillity and stability in the IOR. It can be used to engage other maritime nations and to extend our hand of friendship and co-operation. Also, it can act as a strong deterrent to prevent conflict, or to respond, should it become inevitable.

According to the same document, India has prioritised closer ties with its neighbouring South Asian countries: 'India has a vision of South Asia, unshackled from historical divisions and bound together in collective pursuit of peace and prosperity.' India believes that SAARC can facilitate economic linkages through such initiatives as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA).³ Its position on China, according to this document, however, is mixed. On one hand, it states that 'there is a strong national consensus on improving and developing relations with China.' On the other, it also shows a wariness of China's 'attempts to gain a strategic toe-hold in the IOR'.⁴ In the section on "Strategy for Employment in Peace", the Indian Navy and Coast Guard envisage a constabulary role for themselves. Constabulary operations that the Indian Navy has engaged in include anti-poaching, anti-smuggling, anti-piracy and coastal security. The Indian Coast Guard has performed most of these law enforcement functions since it was established in 1978. Understandably, the emphasis is on acting against illegal activities in the Maritime Zones of India (MZI) and countering threats to the country. If, however, India is genuinely committed to regional stability and co-operation, as stated in the document, it should also be concerned about Indian fishermen poaching in the waters of other countries. It can be argued, therefore, that the Indian Coast Guard's anti-poaching governance also includes Indian fishing vessels.

More recently, in 2012, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), an autonomous institute funded by the Indian Ministry of Defence, published a book titled *Grand Strategy for India: 2020 and Beyond*. This book contains a chapter by Dr Arvind Gupta, then IDSA's Director-General and currently India's Deputy National Security Advisor, on the role of South Asia in India's national security strategy. In that chapter, Dr Gupta proposes the following as content for an Indian national security strategy document:

India shares a common cultural and security space with the countries in the South Asian region. As a prominent Asian nation with critical national interests in South Asia, India has special responsibility to ensure peace and stability in the region. India will work towards this end by co-operating with countries in the region.... India believes that South Asian countries are capable of dealing with their problems without the involvement of external powers ... India attaches great importance to its relations with China. It believes that both countries have enough room to develop.... It will seek to expand the area of co-operation in all spheres [with China] including in the field of security.⁵

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gupta, A., 'South Asia in India's National Security Strategy', in Krishnappa Venkatshamy and Princy George (Eds), *Grand Strategy for India: 2020 and Beyond*, New Delhi: Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, Pentagon Press, 2012, pp. 191-2. <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book_GrandStrategyIndia.pdf>.

It is important to note, however, that earlier in the chapter, as part of his analysis, Dr Gupta argues that India-China rivalry could sharpen in the future and play itself out in the Indian Ocean Region. He calls on India to devise a strategy for dealing with China, which, according to him, has the ambition to play a dominant role in South Asia. In regard to Sri Lanka, Dr Gupta points out that the most important stumbling block in the India-Sri Lanka relationship is the Tamil issue and that India is also concerned about Sri Lanka's turn towards China.⁶ On this latter point, it should be noted that while Sri Lanka gravitated very close to China during President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration, the government of President Maithripala Sirisena, which came into office in January 2015, has distanced itself somewhat from China. Based on Dr Gupta's analysis and proposals, the following observations can be made about India's strategic vision in South Asia. First, co-operation with the other South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, could play an important role in India's overall national security strategy. Second, regional stability should be an important objective of India's national security strategy because it affects New Delhi's immediate security environment. Regional stability in South Asia would surely involve the territorial integrity of both India and the other countries in the region, which includes Sri Lanka. Third, while India will co-operate with China, it will try to limit the latter's role in South Asian regional issues. This does not preclude other South Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, from co-operating with China but it does entail that they should be cautious about drawing China into South Asian regional issues.

Sri Lanka's National Security

For many years, the separatist armed struggle waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) posed the gravest threat to Sri Lanka's national security. In May 2009, Sri Lanka comprehensively defeated the LTTE militarily, one of the most feared terrorist organisations in the world. For approximately thirty years, the LTTE posed a separatist threat to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity and the safety of its civilian population. Many observers in Sri Lanka believe that the military defeat of the LTTE will enable the country to better proceed with its quest for economic development. They do not recognise, however, that even though the LTTE was defeated in 2009, the threat to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity is far from over, since pro-LTTE groups among sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora continue to support the separatist cause. While some of those groups support the continuation of the violent struggle pursued by the LTTE, others support the pursuit of the separatist struggle through non-violent means such as political advocacy in the international arena. While Sri Lanka will have to remain vigilant on the home front, a large part of Sri Lanka's efforts to counter the continuing separatist threat will, therefore, have to take place in the international arena.

For the last twenty years or so, India has been consistent in its support for Sri Lanka's territorial integrity. This commitment has been reiterated by Indian political leaders, officials and scholars many times in recent years. While Sri Lanka has had a very good relationship with the Indian Government over in this period, relations with Tamil Nadu, the Indian state with which it shares a maritime border, have encountered difficulties. A current pressing problem that Sri Lanka is faced with is the large numbers of Tamil Nadu fishing boats that poach in Sri Lankan waters. The nature of Indian coalition politics is such that whenever the two main Indian national political parties – the Congress and the BJP – are weak at the centre, regional Tamil Nadu political parties such as

⁶ Gupta, A., *op cit.*, pp. 183, 188, 190.

M. Karunanidhi's DMK or Jayalalithaa's AIDMK, can exert a substantial influence over India's Sri Lanka policy. While Sri Lankan political leaders, officials and scholars are well aware of the geopolitical imperative of maintaining a close understanding and relationship with India, memories of India's support for Tamil militant groups in the early- to mid-1980s are deep-seated. Those memories tend to introduce an element of mistrust into Sri Lanka's relations with India, a relationship that both countries are keen on nurturing. The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE turned India against the group and, for the last twenty years or so, Sri Lanka and India have done their best to put their troubled past behind them. They succeeded to such an extent that, in the mid-2010s, a bilateral Defence Co-operation Agreement (DCA) was discussed. The last time the DCA was broached was when India's then Chief of Army Staff visited Sri Lanka in December 2012.

Sri Lanka's contemporary national security concerns were well articulated by its then Secretary of Defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, in a speech given at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU), near Colombo, in June 2013.⁷ The number one national security concern for Sri Lanka that Mr Rajapaksa identified was 'the possible re-emergence of terrorism'. In the speech, he traces the source of this threat to four pro-LTTE factions active in the international arena. These are the Tamil Co-ordinating Committee (TCC), which advocates the continuation of the LTTE's deceased supremo, Prabhakaran's, violent struggle, the Transnational Government of Tamil Elam (TGTE) and the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), both of which advocate the pursuit of the separatist effort through non-violent means such as political advocacy in the international arena, and the LTTE Headquarters Group (LTTEHG), which engages in illegal activities such as human smuggling. In Mr Rajapaksa's words:

All of the LTTE-linked groups are co-ordinated by the GTF and united by one overarching objective. Their unwavering intent is the division of Sri Lanka and the establishment of a separate state for Tamil Eelam.⁸

Another important national security concern that Mr Rajapaksa identified is 'the creation of ethnic divisions and communal violence'. An important point to note about this concern – which has a bearing on India – is the tendency for some members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community to identify with the Tamil community of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, rather than with their fellow Sri Lankans. This cross-border link facilitates the interference of Tamil Nadu politicians in India's Sri Lanka policy whenever Indian coalition politics enables them to obtain substantial leverage at the central government level. In Mr Rajapaksa's view, one of the ways to deal with this concern is the 'forging of a common Sri Lankan identity'. The implication is that, if there is a strong Sri Lankan identity, all members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community would identify more with their fellow Sri Lankans than with Tamil Nadu. Mr Rajapaksa also identified the 'challenges of maritime security and border control' as important national security concerns for Sri Lanka. Poaching by Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters is seen in that context. Mr Rajapaksa viewed the maintenance of good relations with all the major powers, including India and China, as important

⁷ Rajapaksa, G., 'Sri Lanka's National Security Concerns', speech delivered to the students of the inaugural MPhil/PhD Programme of the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, 13 June 2013. <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Sri_Lanka_National_Security_Concerns_20130613_08>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

for safeguarding Sri Lanka's national security.⁹ While the defeat of the LTTE has enabled Sri Lanka to broaden its approach to national security, Colombo has to remain vigilant about the continuing separatist threat. While Sri Lanka must ultimately rely on itself to safeguard its national security, the right kind of international co-operation, particularly with India, can help it to achieve that goal.

India-Sri Lanka Relationship: Opportunities and Challenges

The key challenge that India will face in the near future from the continuing separatist threat to Sri Lanka is the influence that LTTE-linked elements of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora may try to exert on it through Tamil Nadu politicians. The exertion of such an influence would be extremely detrimental to the India-Sri Lanka relationship. On this issue, India will have to insulate its Sri Lanka policy from the influence of Tamil Nadu politicians. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has shown some signs of doing this – aided by his government's large parliamentary majority – and it would be good for the India-Sri Lanka relationship if India sustains this trend. India's strategic vision is clearly committed to regional stability and this would surely include the maintenance of the territorial integrity of the countries in the region, thus, assisting Sri Lanka to maintain its territorial integrity should provide India with a valuable source of goodwill.

On the issue of poaching by Tamil Nadu fishermen in Sri Lankan waters, the key challenge that India will face is that of enforcing maritime border security on Indian fishing vessels going into Sri Lankan waters. It is reported in Sri Lanka that, while fishing vessels coming out of Tamil Nadu are equipped with GPS systems, they continue to purposefully cross into Sri Lankan waters. The constabulary role of the Indian Coast Guard could be expanded to include this task. There is a great deal of concern over this issue in Sri Lanka because it is a threat to the security of Sri Lanka's maritime border, its fisheries industry and the livelihoods of northern Sri Lankan fishermen. For India, co-operating closely with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard in enforcing maritime border security would provide a useful opportunity to further improve the bilateral relationship. From Sri Lanka's perspective, such a step would be most welcome and it would also be consistent with the emphasis on co-operation enunciated in India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia. Such co-operation between the Indian and Sri Lankan navies and coastguards could take the form of joint or co-ordinated maritime border patrols and monitoring.

The so-called "China factor" will have an important bearing on the India-Sri Lanka relationship over the next decade or so. Sri Lanka's relationship with China has traditionally been a strong one. China is both a major trading partner and investor in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has maintained a strong relationship with China for much of its independent history. Having said that, there is a realisation in Sri Lanka that it had become too dependent on China in the last few years. Colombo is now engaging, therefore, in efforts to diversify its international relationships. The key challenge that India will face vis-a-vis China in Sri Lanka is coming to terms with Colombo's right to pursue an independent foreign policy as a sovereign state. Any such foreign policy would involve the maintenance of sound relations with all major powers, including India and China, while not becoming too dependent on any of them. The key opportunity for India arises from the conviction shared among Sri Lankan political leaders, officials and scholars that Sri Lanka must reassure India about its links with China. As has already been asserted, the maintenance of a close

⁹ *Ibid.*

understanding and warm relationship with India is a geopolitical imperative for Sri Lanka. Most Sri Lankan leaders and experts are aware to at least some extent of the complex nature of the India-China relationship and they are committed to maintaining a close understanding with India on matters regarding China. A Sri Lanka that is fully cognisant and accepting of Indian views on the China factor would be welcomed in New Delhi.

Conclusion

India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia shows a strong commitment to regional stability and co-operation. Sri Lanka is significant for India as it is the latter's closest maritime neighbour. Sri Lanka's contemporary national security concerns include the possible re-emergence of terrorism and, relatedly, the continuing separatist threat emanating from the activities of LTTE-linked Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora groups, the fostering of ethnic and communal harmony and the forging of a common Sri Lankan identity, the maintenance of maritime security and border control, and the forging of sound relations with all major powers. Given the geographic, economic and cultural proximity of the two countries, those Sri Lankan issues also present challenges and opportunities for India.

As India pursues an ambitious strategic vision, it would do well to pay close attention to its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia and to Sri Lanka, its closest maritime neighbour. As has been emphasised, the maintenance of a close relationship with India is a geopolitical imperative for Sri Lanka. The élites of both India and Sri Lanka will have to work together on overcoming the challenges and building on the opportunities identified in this paper over the coming years.

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