

OPINION

Colombo's victory over the Tamils shows India's power is on the wane

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Mainstream Weekly

THOUSANDS of non-combatants, according to the United Nations, were killed in the final phase of the Sri Lankan war this year as government forces overran the Tamil Tiger guerrillas. Nearly five months after Colombo's stunning military triumph, the peace dividend remains elusive, with President Mahinda Rajapaksa setting out—in the name of “eternal vigilance”—to expand by 50 per cent an already-large military. Little effort has been made to reach out to the Tamil minority and begin a process of national reconciliation.

China, clearly, was the decisive factor in ending the war through its generous supply of offensive weapons and its munificent aid. It even got its ally Pakistan to actively assist Rajapaksa in his war strategy. Today, China is the key factor in providing Colombo the diplomatic cover against the institution of a UN investigation into possible war crimes, or the appointment of a UN special envoy on Sri Lanka. In return for such support, Beijing has been able to make strategic inroads into a critically located country in India's backyard.

Unlike China's assistance, India's role has received little international attention. But India, too, contributed to the Sri Lankan bloodbath through its military aid, except that it has ended up, strangely, with its leverage undermined.

For years, India had pursued a hands-off approach toward Sri Lanka in response to two developments—a disastrous 1987-1990 peacekeeping operation there; and the 1991 assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a member of the Tamil Tigers. But having been outmanoeuvred by China's success in extending strategic reach to Sri Lanka in recent years, New Delhi got sucked into providing major assistance to Colombo, lest it lose further ground in Sri Lanka.

From opening an unlimited line of military credit for Sri Lanka to extending critical naval and intelligence assistance, India provided sustained war support despite a deteriorating humanitarian situation there. A “major turning point” in the war, as Sri Lankan Navy Chief Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda acknowledged, came when the rebels' supply ships were eliminated, one by one, with input from Indian naval intelligence, cutting off all supplies to the rebel-held areas. That in turn allowed the Sri Lankan ground forces to make rapid advances and unravel the de facto state the Tigers had estab-

lished in the island nation's north and east.

Sri Lanka, for its part, practised adroit but duplicitous diplomacy: it assured India it would approach other arms suppliers only if New Delhi couldn't provide a particular weapon system it needed. Yet it quietly began buying arms from China and Pakistan without even letting India know. In doing so, Colombo mocked Indian appeals that it rely for its legitimate defence needs on India, the main regional power. It was only by turning to India's adversaries for weapons, training and other aid that Colombo pulled off a startling military triumph. In any event, Colombo was emboldened by the fact that the more it chipped away at India's traditional role, the more New Delhi seemed willing to pander to its needs.

Indeed, Rajapaksa deftly played the China, India and Pakistan cards to maximise gains. After key Tamil Tiger leaders had been killed in the fighting, Rajapaksa—to New Delhi's mortification—thanked China, India and Pakistan in the same breath for Sri Lanka's victory.

Today, India stands more marginalised than ever in Sri Lanka. Its natural constituency—the Tamils—feels not only betrayed, but also looks at India as a colluder in the bloodbath. India already had alienated the Sinhalese majority in the 1980s, when it first armed the Tamil Tigers and then sought to disarm them through an ill-starred peacekeeping foray that left almost three times as many Indian troops dead as the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan.

India's waning leverage over Sri Lanka is manifest from the way it now has to jostle for influence there with arch-rivals China and Pakistan. Hambantota—the billion-dollar port Beijing is building in Sri Lanka's southeast—symbolises the Chinese strategic challenge to India from the oceans.

Even as some 280,000 displaced Tamils—equivalent to the population of Belfast—continue to be held incommunicado in barbed-wire camps, India has been unable to persuade Colombo to set them free, with incidents being reported of security forces opening fire on those seeking to escape from the appalling conditions. One of the few persons allowed to visit some of these camps was UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who said after his tour in May: “I have travelled around the world and visited similar places, but these are by far the

most appalling scenes I have seen...” Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said recently that India has conveyed its “concerns in no uncertain terms to Sri Lanka on various occasions, stressing the need for them to focus on resettling and rehabilitating the displaced Tamil population at the earliest”. But India seems unable to make a difference even with messages delivered in “no uncertain terms”.

THE story of the loss of India's pre-eminent role in Sri Lanka actually begins in 1987, when New Delhi made an abrupt U-turn in policy and demanded that the Tigers lay down their arms. Their refusal to bow to the diktat was viewed as treachery, and the Indian Army was ordered to rout them.

Since then, Sri Lanka has served as a reminder of how India's foreign policy is driven not by resolute, long-term goals, but by a meandering approach influenced by the personal caprice of those in power. The 1987 policy reversal occurred after then Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene—a wily old fox—sold neophyte Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the line that an “Eelam”, or Tamil homeland, in Sri Lanka would be a dangerous precursor to a Greater Eelam uniting Tamils on both sides of the Palk Straits. In buying that myth, Gandhi did not consider a simple truth: if Bangladesh's 1971 creation did not provoke an Indian Bengali nationalist demand for a Greater Bangladesh, why would an Eelam lead to a Greater Eelam?

Actually, the Tamils in India and Sri Lanka have pursued divergent identities since the fall of the Pandyan kingdom in the 14th century. While the Eelam struggle is rooted in the treatment of Tamils as second-class citizens in Sri Lanka—where affirmative action has been instituted for the majority Sinhalese and a mono-ethnic national identity sought to be shaped—the Tamils in India face no discrimination and have been fully integrated into the national mainstream.

Another personality driven shift in India's Sri Lanka policy came after the 2004 change of government in New Delhi, when the desire to avenge Gandhi's assassination trumped strategic considerations, with the hands-off approach being abandoned. That handily meshed with the hawkish agenda of Rajapaksa, who began chasing the military option soon after coming to power in 2005. “It is their duty to help us at this stage,” Rajapaksa said about India. And Indian help came liberally.

In fact, such has been the unstinting Indian support that even after the crushing of the



Despite the smiles all round and the claims of a close relationship, India has lost influence in Sri Lanka. This change in the relationship between the two countries is a result of India's meandering, capricious approach to foreign policy, and the space available to Sri Lanka to look for friends among India's adversaries.

Tamil Tigers, India went out of the way to castigate the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, in June for shining a spotlight on the deplorable human-rights situation in Sri Lanka, including the continuing internment of internally displaced Tamils. India accused Pillay—a distinguished South African judge of Indian descent who has sought an independent international investigation into the alleged war crimes committed by all sides in Sri Lanka—of going beyond her brief, saying “the independence of the High Commissioner cannot be presumed to exceed that of the UN Secretary-General.”

The costs of lending such support have been high. New Delhi today is groping to bring direction to its Sri Lanka policy by defining its objectives more coherently, even as it struggles to respond to the Chinese strategy to build maritime choke-points in the Indian Ocean region. Indeed, India has ceded strategic space in its regional backyard in such a manner that Bhutan now remains its sole pocket of influence. In Sri Lanka, India has allowed itself to become a marginal player despite its geostrategic advantage and trade and investment clout.

More fundamentally, the pernicious myth Jayewardene planted in Gandhi's mind triggered a chain of events still exacting costs on Indian security and interests. In fact, nothing better illustrates the fallacy Jayewardene sold

Gandhi than the absence of a Tamil backlash in India to the killings of thousands of countless Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka this year, and to the continued incarceration in tent camps of 280,000 Tamil refugees, including 80,000 children. In fact, even as the Sri Lankan war reached a gory culmination, India's Tamil Nadu State voted in the national elections for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Gandhi's widow, Sonia Gandhi, although that governing coalition had shied away from raising its voice over the Sri Lankan slaughter.

Today, the upsurge of Sinhala chauvinism flows from the fact that the Sri Lankan military accomplished a task whose pursuit forced the mightier Indian Army to make an ignominious exit 19 years ago. Consequently, Colombo is going to be even less inclined than before to listen to New Delhi. Indeed, the manner in which Colombo played the China and Pakistan cards in recent years to outsmart India is likely to remain an enduring feature of Sri Lankan diplomacy, making Sri Lanka a potential springboard for anti-India manoeuvres.

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