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Number Four

June 1986

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**bliss papers**

**Number 4, June 1986**

**Published by:**

**Bangladesh Institute of International  
and Strategic Studies, Dhaka**

The views expressed in the **bliss papers** are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

**Price :**

**Taka 20.00 / US \$ 4.00 (including surface postage)**

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**1/4 Elephant Road, Dhaka Tel : 406234**

**Printed by :**

**Asiatic Press,**

**C/o Civil & Military Press**

**4, Zindabazar 3rd Lane**

**Dhaka, Bangladesh.**



**BISS PAPERS**  
**Number 4, June 1986**

**STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF  
INDO-SRI LANKAN RELATIONS**

**Abdur Rob Khan**

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**The author is a Deputy Director of the BISS in charge of Strategic Studies Division.**



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## INTRODUCTION

Peace and security in South Asia is essentially a function of Indo-Pakistan relations. Over the last four decades four wars have been fought in South Asia and three of them were between India and Pakistan, the third in 1971 being a decisive one changing the balance of power in South Asia at least qualitatively. In very recent years also the impact of Indo-Pak relations on the South Asian system was manifest just on the eve of the preparatory meeting of the SAARC<sup>1</sup> at the Foreign Ministers' level in Male during July 1984 when the sudden set-back in the ongoing normalisation talks between India and Pakistan almost rendered the Male meeting uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Indo-Sri Lankan relations may be considered as a recent addition to this type of bilateral strategic links with Sub-continental implication.<sup>3</sup> At least on two occasions indications were there that Indo-Sri Lankan relations might affect peace and the nascent process of regionalism in South Asia. One was the immediate aftermath of July 1983 ethnic clash in Sri Lanka coinciding with the formal launching of the

1. Then known as SARC — South Asian Regional Cooperation. Officially named during first Summit in Dhaka, December 1985 as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
2. The uncertainty passed away with a sigh of relief when both the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan emerged from the same aircraft at Male airport. Observers believe that such is the prominence of these two countries in the region that regional cooperation in South Asia cannot go very far unless it goes far enough between India and Pakistan.
3. A Sri Lankan scholar held that Sri Lankan approach to SAARC would be greatly determined by Indo-Sri Lankan equation. See S.U. Kodikara, "Asymmetry and Commonalities" in Pran Chopra *et al* (eds.), *Future of South Asia* (Dhaka: University Press Limited), 1986, p. 118.



Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) of the SAARC and the second was Sri-Lanka's threat to boycott the Thimpu meet of the SAARC Foreign Ministers in May 1985. For India, Sri Lanka has been a preoccupation in a significant way since mid-1983. A veteran Indian diplomat observed that Sri Lanka has the potential of being a running sore like Pakistan with a similar danger of outside involvement.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, public statements in India and Sri Lanka about each other also have had a sharper edge than that nowadays exchanged between India and Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

Tamil ethnic problem at the moment is central to Indo-Sri Lankan relations. Security concerns of Sri Lanka and to an extent, of India are linked to the vexed Tamil problem in a complex way. Historically the sore point between India and Sri Lanka was the plight of the stateless Indian Tamil plantation workers, not the Sri Lankan Tamils who could provoke ethnic interest and affinity only in Tamil Nadu. Since July 1983 ethnic riot in Sri Lanka, however, the issue became a national problem of India<sup>6</sup> with the problem of Indian being somewhat relegated. It was also on this occasion that India timed the pronouncement of what came to be known, unofficially though, as Indian doctrine of regional security.<sup>7</sup> The issue not only has taken the shape of a crisis<sup>8</sup> it seems to have become more protracted. And the way Rajiv has involved himself might itself raise India's stake in the crisis.

But then there are other security issues between the two countries some of which have direct bearing on the Tamil problem, some eman-

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4. Jagat Mehta, "India, Home and Abroad: Importance of Good Neighbourliness" *Statesman*, 13 April 1985.

5. See Pran Chopra, "From Mistrust to Cooperation" in Pran Chopra *et al* (eds), *op. cit.* p 26.

6. *The Hindu*, 1 August 1983.

7. See *Strategic Survey 1983-84* (HSS), p. 90.

8. See Mohammad Humayun Kabir, "Crisis Management : A Case Study of Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka" *Regional Studies* (Islamabad) Vol. IV No. 1 (Winter) 1985 pp. 88-103.



ating from it and others only indirectly linked. A Sri Lankan scholar aptly remarked:

As is the case of India and Pakistan, the strategic dimension of Indo-Lanka relations have also been changing in recent years, partly in consequence of changes in the strategic situation in the region, partly because of collapse of the detente and changing configurations of global politics, but also because of the escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and the role which India has played in the island's crisis specially since July 1983.<sup>9</sup>

The strategic location of Sri Lanka in the India Ocean just across the narrow Palk Strait has always provided the geopolitical compulsions for India to watch Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign policies, perhaps with equal, if not more, emphasis to that of Pakistan. The Trimcomalee Oil Farm deal, the possibility of allegedly providing harbour facilities to US navy, a new agreement on transmission and relay facilities for VOA, induction of foreign military and intelligence agents for beefing up Sri Lankan defence, increasing military linkage with Pakistan and above all, the UNP Government's overall free-enterprise and West leaning open economic policies, all are important elements in Indo-Sri Lankan security calculus. Also historical forces resulting in deep-rooted suspicion and fear-psychosis and divergence in outlooks and stand on regional and international issues have marked Indo-Sri Lankan relations for long. President Jayewardene's urgent appeal for assistance from Western countries and his apprehension that the island may be divided like Cyprus in the near future are indicative of a desperate situation at home and at least by implication, a deep strategic divide between Sri Lanka and India. India's mediatory role naturally seems to have entered into very rough weather. As the crisis becomes more

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9. S. U. Kodikara, "Regional Roles and Behaviour in South Asia : A Theoretical Framework of Regional Cooperation". in Bhabani Sen Gupta (ed.) *Regional Cooperation and Development : Perceptual, Military and Nuclear Arms Race Problem* (Vol. 1) (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers) 1986, p. 45



and more intractable, the pertinent questions are : What direction the Indo-Sri Lankan relations may take in future ? How would Sri Lanka and India respond in the event of certain dramatic developments, like the outbreak of another spell of large scale Tamil-Sinhala riot, more intensified guerrilla activities accompanied by near breakdown of administration and for that matter, more intensified frontal battle between the Sri Lankan security forces and the Tamil separatists, as both sides seem to be getting more and more equipped and prepared ?

One way of answering these questions is to take up the issues between India and Sri Lanka individually, find out the stakes and stands of the respective parties and then look beyond the immediate horizon. While useful insights of the individual cases may be obtained in this approach, it is only when the issues are telescoped against a bigger landscape of perceptions and policy framework that they would fall into places. Even though India-Sri Lankan relations as such is a case study of India's relations with neighbours, such a broad-based perspective is necessary in view of the Indo-centric nature of South Asia where a set of geopolitical and perceptual realities determines the salients and postures of India towards the neighbours in general<sup>10</sup> and in the current crisis in particular.

## PERSPECTIVE

Debate on Indian foreign policy and security concerns since independence, and more so in recent years, displays increasing role consciousness in the region and the world at large. Such consciousness basically centres around role perception, role recognition and role playing. India's perceived role in the international system has two

10. See Bimal Prasad (ed.) *India's Foreign Policy : Studies in Continuity and Change* (New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.) 1979. Also see Abdur Rob Khan, "Post-Indira India and Her Neighbours" and Imtiaz Ahmed, "Class, Underlying Values and Indian Foreign Policy : Role in South Asia,, in *India's Policy Fundamentals, Neighbours and Post-Indira Developments* (BJISS Papers No. 3), July 1985.



related strands : a strong, stable nation and a world mission commensurate to her size, population, resources and power capabilities—military, political and economic.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s such goals were manifest in her active espousing of the cause of the Non-aligned Movement in particular and the newly emergent countries of Asia and Africa in general. Such a role perception was basically aimed at attaining an independent international standing. More recent and concrete stand of the world mission as perceived by the Indian elites may be evident from the following :

India constitutes one-sixth of humanity, is among the leading industrial and agricultural producers, major military power and a major R & D power. India has to look at international relations in terms of its interaction with China, the Soviet Union, USA and West Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere the goal of world mission has been viewed in terms of what has come to be known as three-stage foreign policy of India : frontier settling and regional pre-eminence, acquisition of world mission and active involvement in world affairs<sup>13</sup>. As put by an Indian scholar in line with Kautilya's *mandala* doctrine :

India's foreign and security policy has tended to operate in three concentric circles, namely, the Super Powers, the Third World and the Neighbours. The outermost circle received the most attention while the closest ones received the least.<sup>14</sup>

In the South Asian context the perceived role has been variously described as one of benign negligence a tendency to take things about

11. Paul H. Kreisberg, "India after Indira." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol, 3, Spring, 1985, p. 876.
12. K. Subrahmanyam, "India's Pre-eminence", *World Focus*, Annual No. 71-72 (November-December), 1985, p. 12.
13. See Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
14. See Baljit Singh, *India's Foreign Policy : An Analysis*, p. 82 as cited in Noor A. Hossain, "Indian Regional Foreign Policy: Strategic and Security Dimension", *Strategic Studies*, (Islamabad) Vol. III, No. 1 (Autumn) 1981, p. 35. For some details of the *mandala* doctrine see, Somnath Dhar, *Kautilya and Arthashastra* (New Delhi : Marwah Publications) 1981.



neighbourhood for granted, and management of the security of the region. The last variant seems to fit well in the context of the current Sri Lanka crisis.

Role recognition, on the other hand, pertains mainly to desire for acceptance by both the powers and the neighbours as a legitimate force to be reckoned with. The salients of the recognition issue as perceived by India may be summarised in the following way : "The priority which China compels on the foreign policy agenda of the Super Powers has never been India's".<sup>15</sup> But what India resents most is that the world powers, at least some of them (pointing basically to the USA) are "still unable to fix for India a place in strategic schema of the planet which would respond to India's national pride and aspirations and reflect its considerable achievements" since independence.<sup>16</sup> What is more, her interaction with neighbours is often complicated by involvement the outside powers in the region.<sup>17</sup> More serious complaints are voiced regarding role recognition vis-a-vis the immediate South Asian neighbours who "do not understand and recognise the sensibilities of India as the largest nation in South Asia."<sup>18</sup> Some consider India's inability to command acquiescence from neighbours in terms of absence of any rules of mutual interaction in South Asia and also lack of adequate economic and military power on the part of India.<sup>19</sup> One of the greatest problems, in India's perception, is that her neighbours often bolster their sense of security in a manner that goes against the interest of India and act in a manner that tends to weaken her polity. Such

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15. Bhabani Sen Gupta, "India, and the Super Powers" in M. S. Rajan and Shivaji Ganguly (eds.), *Great Powers, World Order and the Third World* (New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.), 1981, p. 131.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Nikhil Chakravarty, "Good-neighbourliness in Perspective", *World Focus*, Vol. 6, No. 11-12, 1985, p. 4

18. Bhabani Sen Gupta, "Regionalism in South Asia : Roles and Behaviour" in Bhabani Sen Gupta (ed.) *op. cit* p. 23.

19. *Ibid.*



activities as perceived by India range from aiding domestic dissents (as levelled against Pakistan and also for some time in the past against Bangladesh) to taking help from external powers (Nepal from China, Pakistan from USA and Sri Lanka from wide range of sources including USA, UK, Israel and Pakistan).

Another dimension of role recognition from the neighbours is the failure on the part of the latter to appreciate (and emulate?) the strength of her rich cultural and civilizational heritage, political system and socio-economic policies. Critical views about neighbours regarding pervasive anti-Indianism, less open and politically less permissive societies, incompatibility of political systems are manifestation of that. India also considers herself as the source of inspiration for democratic and secular forces in the region. Admits a self-critique, "There is a certain ethnocentric arrogance among sections of our elites who believe that others should think exactly on the lines that we do and have values and aspirations identical with ours".<sup>20</sup> Her role in helping Nepal in ousting the despotic Ranas in 1950 and in driving out the occupation army of Pakistan from Bangladesh in 1971, in the view of many, goes unrecognized.<sup>21</sup>

Role playing, finally, has many variants. Basically urge for role playing stems from the perceived gap between *aspired* hegemonistic and big-brotherly postures and the wherewithal which India lacks to materialise the former. The majority of the Indian elites do not find anything wrong in the big-brotherly or hegemonistic behaviour which they justify as natural to a large power and as often necessary to assert the 'undeniable' but unaccepted fact of Indian primacy in the region.<sup>22</sup> One way in which the role could be played is increased power projection through increased defence build-up as has been

20. K. Subrahmanyam, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

21. Inder Malhotra, "Some Rude Realities", *World Focus*, Sixth Annual Number, 71-72 (November-December) 1985, p. 16

22. Bhabani Sen Gupta, "Regionalism in South Asisa", *op. cit.*



evident over the last decades. A second variant is one of defining the sphere of security orbit in terms of the strategic unity of the Sub-continent as inherited from the British, despite the fact that the political reality of the Sub-continent has radically changed into multiple political actors from the political unity of the British period. Such a perception of political unity, although it goes against the reality of the Sub-continent, becomes a problematic of India's role playing. Observes a South Asian scholar:

One of the biggest dilemmas of South Asian politics is that India conceives of her neighbouring countries as lying within the defence perimeter and being integral to the security of India, while India's neighbours themselves regard India itself as the source of their insecurity against whom it is necessary to organize their own security interests, sometimes on an extra-regional basis.<sup>23</sup>

This is perhaps where India's objection is most emphatic. The estranged relationship between India and Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal to a great extent is manifestation of this objection. Her notion of security, unlike, most of the Third World countries and like the world powers, is a composite one. Such a notion has been pronounced many times by many Indian leaders. However, in the recent years, the pronouncement has never been so appropriately occasioned and unequivocal as during the height of Tamil crisis in August 1983 when, following Sri Lanka's reported call for assistance from a number of countries against possible foreign attack, India asked powers including those from the neighbourhood to follow a hands-off policy from South Asia.<sup>24</sup> Actual formulation of what has been dubbed as "Indian Doctrine" of regional security, was never pronounced by the government but what was stated by press and elite circle was not contested by the government either. The salients of the Indian Doctrine, as elucidated by a columnist scholar are :

23. S. U. Kodikara, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10

24. *Times of India*, 3 August 1983



India has no intention of intervening in internal conflicts of a South Asian country and it strongly opposes intervention by any country in the internal affairs of any other. India will not tolerate external intervention in a conflict situation in any South Asian country if the intervention has any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implication. No South Asian government must therefore ask for external military assistance with an anti-Indian bias from any country.

If a South Asian country genuinely needs external assistance to deal with a serious internal conflict situation or with an intolerable threat to a government *legitimately established*, it should ask help from a number of neighbouring countries including India. The exclusion of India from such a contingency will be considered to be an *anti-Indian* move on the part of the government concerned<sup>25</sup> (emphasis added).

The Indian leaders claimed in the parliament and the press and media also indicated, that the Indian viewpoints received prompt implicit or explicit approval of the regional as well as international communities.<sup>26</sup> A low-key operation of the doctrine was also visible in the subsequent events that unfolded in the crisis spot under reference.<sup>27</sup>

Qualitatively different formulation of India's role playing, specially, in the regional context, smacking somewhat of Nehruvian and Janata policies, has also been emanating from New Delhi in very recent times. Guided by what is claimed to be 'South Asia destiny',<sup>28</sup> there seems to be greater willingness to avoid confrontation, to deal with problems

25. Bhabani Sen Gupta, "Regional Security : the India Doctrine", *India Today*, 31 August 1983, p. 20.

26. *Ibid.*

27. See Ghani Jafar, "The Tamil Factor: Genesis and Prospects of the Indian Stake", *Regional Studies*, (Islamabad) Vol. II, No 2 (Spring), 1984. pp. 53-54.

28. For very persuasive exposition, see Pran Chopra, "From Mistrust to Cooperation" in Pran Chopra et al (eds.), *Future of South Asia*, *op. cit.*



quietly and display a feeling of appreciation and understanding.<sup>29</sup> It appears that Rajiv's policy after coming to power is a culmination of this line of thinking in terms of playing more constructive neighbourhood policy—rapprochement in the case with Pakistan, play-down of postures and role recognition as is the case with Nepal, being less intransigent and more accommodative as with Bangladesh and desire to play the role of an honest broker as with Sri Lanka.

But then there may be other interpretations as well. A section of the Indian elites believes that currently India is blessed with considerable international respect resulting mainly from resilience of the Indian political system amidst the series of shocks and tragedies of the recent past. And this new found respect may face the risks of being diluted by her troubled neighbourhood.<sup>30</sup> So it is in the greater interest of keeping up international image that a working relationship with the neighbours is warranted.

A somewhat similar interpretation originates peculiarly from India's apparent frustration with neighbours for the identity crisis they suffer from vis-a-vis India.<sup>31</sup> Such a view favours a rather resigned approach toward the activities of the neighbours, and if necessary, certain amount of distancing from them so that the neighbours themselves can define their identity and feel confident about dealing with India. Of course, interpretations in terms of active regional policies with a view to diverting attention from some of the overriding domestic problems may also be offered as to the nature of regional role playing.

Even then there is an underlying unity among these variants of interpretations. Security concerns of India originate mainly from the gap between actual role playing and her perceived role. The defence perimeter of India has shrunk a lot from its Sub-continental frame to India's immediate frontiers. Yet at the perceptual and

29. Kreisberg, *op. cit.*

30. Jagat Mehta, *op. cit.*

31. Subrahmanyam, *op. cit.* p. 12.



policy levels the primary concern remains her preeminent role in the security management of South Asia, at least, to ensure that the security developments in the region do not go against her interest. The India-Sri Lanka relations may be viewed in this frame of analysis.

## INDO-SRI LANKA RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This section highlights the type of security issues that governed the Indo-Sri Lankan relationship in historical perspective and assesses the congruence and divergence of security concerns between the two countries in the past upto 1977 when the present UNP government came to power. It may sound pointless to play up the past because, as in domestic politics, there is nothing like permanent friends or enemies in international relations. Yet it would always be useful to understand the nature of deep-rooted animosities, if any, and to understand how stakes are formed and get entrenched over time.

India's current problems with Sri Lanka basically stem from a number of cultural, ethnic and religious factors dating back even to pre-historic periods. In Indian mythological traditions Lanka was the land of *Yakshas* (demons) and their king, Ravana who kidnapped and dishonoured Seeta, the bride of India's greatest religious leader Rama. In India's religious festivals, the image of Ravana is burned as the symbol of evils. On the other hand, Ravana is portrayed as a national hero in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan folk tales abound with memories of the success of the *Yakshas* against invaders from India.<sup>32</sup>

The ethnic factors were sharpened over the discord rooted in the history of settlement in the island. The two contending communities—the Sinhalese and the Tamils—had their roots in mainland India and the religious developments in both territories, Sinhala island and

32. Kreisberg, *op. cit.*, p. 879.



mainland India, specially South India have never been isolated. But great confusion and conflicting interpretations are there as to who were the original settlers and who were the invaders, each claim, however being based on a precedence in chronological order rather than the absolute belonging to soil.<sup>33</sup> In any case this is how, an entrenched historical relationship between India and Sri Lanka may be traced. The major schism between the two in historical perspective is one of rise and fall of religion-based dynastic and more precisely, territorial identification of religion which generated 'politically emotive ideology'.<sup>34</sup> The Sinhalese were Aryan people who came to the island from North India while the Tamils settlers came from South Indian states across the Palk Straits. This broad commonality of origin, in retrospect, could have provided the basis for Sri Lankan national cohesion between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. A second retrospective factor that also could have made the task of assimilation and national integration easier was the rise of Buddhism in the third century B.C. on both sides of the Palk Straits that is, in South India and almost all of Sri Lanka. But a few land mark discontinuities contributed to the historic divide compounding the security concerns on both sides. The Sinhalese settled in the island discontinuing their links with far north.<sup>35</sup> There had hardly been any fresh contact with their place of origin after the first few spells of migration. But the Tamil Dravidians who later dispossessed them and fought with them from just across the narrow Straits did not delink their connections with South

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33. Both interpretation, however, agree that the Veddas were the aboriginals of the island. For same details of history, see, C. R. de Silva, "The Sinhalese-Tamil Rift in Sri Lanka" in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson and Dennis Dalton (eds.), *The States of South Asia: Problem of National Integration* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.) 1982, pp. 155-174, and also Ghani Jafar *op. cit.*, specially pp. 26-25 and the footnotes.

34. For an interesting analysis of historico-strategic schism between Sinhala island and South India, see *ibid.*

35. See Pran Chopra, *op. cit.*, p. 26



India. Not only that the Sinhalese community's religious chronicle—the *Mahavamsa* is full of narration of the repeated attacks on Sri Lanka from South India and the defence provided by the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese identified themselves with the island soil while the Tamils valued their links with South India in order to establish their rights in Sri Lanka.

The second discontinuity was the subsequent disappearance of Buddhism from both north, the place of its origin and South India and rise of a number of militant Hindu states in the South - Pallavas and Colas - in the fifth and sixth centuries. This resulted in increased Hindu Tamil presence in the island. On the other hand, Buddhism became increasingly isolated geographically and ethno-religiously contributing to an increased sense of insecurity among the Sinhalese. The regional power balance also underwent significant change. A self-contained militant Buddhist territorial identity epitomised in the concepts, *Sinhaladipa* (island of the Sinhalese) and *Dhammadipa* (island of the religion, Buddhism) came into being. On the other hand, frequent incursions from the north and swelling in the number of Hindu Tamils in northern Sri Lanka resulted in the rise of a separate Tamil Kingdom on the one hand and a tendency on the part of the island Tamils to look toward the north for moral and material support on the other. Continued rule over Sri Lanka by the Colas and other dynasties also contributed to bitter memories of the Sri Lanka. The Tamil factor and for that matter, south Indian dominance remained an abiding factor in the governance of the island for long, even during the colonial era that ensued in the 14th century.

The relevance of the colonial era in the context of Indo-Sri Lanka relations is basically three-fold: bringing into prominence the strategic importance of Sri Lanka, divergence in approach and attitude to colonial rule by the Indian and Sri Lankan elites and bad memories of colonial rule from British India.

The strategic importance of Sri Lanka (earlier Ceylon) was not lost to the merchant and naval powers as it was considered to be a



vital link for trade and domination of the Indian Ocean and the adjoining region.<sup>36</sup> The Dutch evaluation of the island vis-a-vis the Portuguese colonisers was: "When they (the Portuguese) are once turned out of Ceylon, they are out of India."<sup>37</sup> A French Admiral made similar observation in the 18th century regarding the British: "The importance of Ceylon is such that if English troops captured that island its recapture would be more important than all other conquests wherewith one could be in a war in India."<sup>38</sup> It is because of its importance that Lord Mountbatten set up the headquarters of his South-East Asia Command during the World War II in Kandy. Also because of the strategic importance, the British insisted on continuation of the naval and air bases in Sri Lanka within the framework of a Defence Agreement when the question of decolonisation came. In British view:

A basic requirement of Commonwealth strategy was the maintenance of communication in the Indian Ocean by sea and air. Ceylon occupied a commanding position as a base for communication, without which control over the Indian Ocean would be seriously weakened. It provided the only existing fleet base between Malta and Singapore.<sup>39</sup>

Sri Lanka also had deep stake in continuation of the British base in Sri Lanka under a defence agreement and this can be explained to a great extent by the divergence of security perception between Indian elites and Sri Lankan elites. Sri Lankan independence leaders like D.S. Senanayake, Oliver Gunnetilleke were in favour of obtaining independence through cooperation with the imperial

36. See C. R. de Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

37. Mentioned in S. U. Kodikara, *Indo-Ceylon Relations since Independence* (Colombo: The Ceylon Institute of World Affairs) 1965.

38. *Ibid.*

39. H. Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (London, 1971) as cited in K. M. de Silva, "The Model Colony: Reflections on the Transfer of Power in Sri Lanka" in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson and Dennis Dalton (eds.) *op. cit.*, p. 83.



powers even in the allied war efforts that so in reciprocation, the British characterised Sri Lanka as a model colony. Independence in Sri Lanka in 1948 was indeed a peaceful process unlike other South Asian countries, specially India and Pakistan where independence in 1947 was a culmination of long-drawn agitational movement. The Indian elites represented in National Congress was not disposed to helping the allied forces in the war. More important difference in perception was observed in the field of security. To be precise, the Indian elites conceptually inherited the very notion of strategic unity of the Subcontinent as held by the British but attitudinally they preferred to *assume* the inherited role rather than continue the old security management system. The Sri Lankan elites on the other hand, were keen to see continuation of the existing defence arrangements because they had already begun to look toward India as a possible source of threats, thanks to utterances and writing of Indian leaders and scholars.<sup>40</sup> In view of this the Sri Lankan elites "believed that the agreement offered them security against possible threats from India to Sri Lanka's independence."<sup>41</sup> Such a divergent security approach persists even today providing some of the strategic hitches between the two.

Thirdly, the policy of the East India Company and later the British Indian Government, of ruling Sri Lanka from Madras was likened to some extent by the Sinhalese with Indian rule over Lanka and it reminded the Sinhalese of the bad memories of Tamil incursions and domination. Such uneasiness was not without a basis as recalls Jayewardene in connection with possible Indian help in the current crisis :

Indian help is a suspect in the eyes of the Sri Lankan people. In 1915 when there was Sinhala-Muslim riot here, the British brought the Sikhs and Maratha troops from India. There was martial law. The troops were very ruthless.<sup>42</sup>

40. Ibid.

41: *Ibid* p. 83.

42. *Asian Recorder*, 24-30 June 1984, p. 17815-16.



A fourth relevance of the colonial period in the current Indo-Sri Lankan crisis is of course the British policy of importing Tamil plantation labourers in the tea estates of central and southern Sri Lanka. Identity conscious Sinhalese were always averse to such measures having adverse consequence on the demographic balance. On independence the Ceylon Nationalities Act rendered the descendents of the Tamil plantation workers stateless. The fate of the stateless Indian Tamils plagued Indo-Sri Lankan relations for more than three decades.

The immediate post-colonial period, however, witnessed somewhat good rapport between the political leaderships of the two countries and a tendency to keep the vexed question of stateless Indian Tamils at a low level not to mar the political understanding. On many international issues, specially, the emerging Non-aligned Movement India and Sri-Lanka saw eye to eye. At the bilateral and regional level, however, divergent security perceptions persisted and were manifest in many forms. For one, despite the Indian inheritance of the British concept of strategic unity of the Sub-continent, continued British military presence in the periphery of India provided a sense of insecurity to India resulting in the initial hostilities on her part.

The manifestation of this attitude was a series of utterances that at least generated fear-psychosis in the Sinhalese mind. Pronouncements by Nehru, defence officials and politicians depicted the Indian conviction that Sri Lanka was an integral part of Indian defence orbit and because of ethnic, linguistic and cultural links with India, the country would inevitably be drawn into the federation.<sup>43</sup> A statement by one high ranking Indian leader in 1949 may be quoted here:

India and Ceylon must have a common defence strategy and common defence strength and common defence resources. It

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43. Ghani Jafar cites Kodikara liberally to prove this point. See, Ghani Jafar, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33



can not be that Ceylon is in friendship with a group with which India is not in friendship—not that Ceylon has no right to make its own alignment and declare its affiliation—but if there were two hostile groups in the world, and Ceylon and India are with one or the other of them and not with the same group, it will be a bad day for both.<sup>44</sup>

One may note the similarity of formulation of this statement with that of the so-called India doctrine of regional security as mentioned earlier. Although such pronouncements by Indian leadership were never put into operation in the past probably because no serious threats to Indian security arose from Sri Lanka side and the defence agreement with UK was also kept operationally in abeyance, on many occasions the divergence in approach to security was evident from Sri Lanka side. Sri Lanka's security postures and foreign policy behaviour historically happened to display certain anti-Indian bias, directly or indirectly. During the Indo-China crisis Sri Lanka's harbour and airport facilities were liberally extended to the U.S.<sup>45</sup> Even Sri Lanka's attitude was somewhat soft toward SEATO. Kotelawala, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka was recorded as saying :

We have not joined SEATO, but like any other nation, we are free to join it for the purpose of guaranteeing our independence.<sup>46</sup>

Such proclivity of strategic dissonance was also evident in Sri Lanka's cultivating good relationship with China and Pakistan, both of which had adversary relations with India. One recalls Sri Lanka's providing transit facilities to Pakistan army and naval forces following blockade by India during the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence.

44. President of Indian National Congress, quoted in S. U. Kodikera, *Foreign Policy of Sri Lanka*, op. cit.

45. H. S. S. Nisanka, *Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy: A Study of Nonalignment* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.), 1984, 122.

46. S. Wikramaratne, *Ceylon and Kotelawala: A Selection of Speeches*, Colombo, 1984, p. 280.



Sri Lanka even voted against India at the UN on this occasion.<sup>47</sup> Despite the facts that both were ardently espousing the cause of Non-alignment, both co-sponsored the proposal of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP) at the UN 1971 and that there was good personal rapport between the Bandarnaikes and both Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi, such understanding betrayed certain suspicion about Sri Lanka's Non-aligned posture and her stand on IOZOP in India's mind. Such divergent approach was evident specially in the 1970s when Lanka's view on US naval presence in the Indian Ocean was sufficiently qualified and her stand on IOZOP was also diluted following her reciprocal support to the Pakistan proposal of South Asia as a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ)<sup>48</sup>. Although Sri Lanka's relations with Pakistan and for that matter, USA or China did not assume any explicit anti-Indian hue, certain amount of consistency may be observed in Lanka's relations with these countries.

One is then confounded with the problem of explaining these apparent contradictions. In the first place there was divergent security approach despite the executive rapport and understanding on certain important international issues. Obviously, the deep rooted suspicion in Lanka's psyche about India's intention was greatly responsible for this. The motive perhaps was not as much anti-Indianism as it was the desire to distance herself from India guided historically by the had memories of the past. It may also be manifestation of a desire to take an independent posture vis-a-vis India. Secondly, India seemed to have overlooked some of these security postures by Sri Lanka and this apparently is somewhat inconsistent with the grain of role consciousness as depicted earlier. To a certain degree India's dealing with Sri Lanka was similar to the dilemma she faced vis-a-vis Nepal although in case of Sri Lanka there was no specific and formidable external factor in the bilateral equation as with Nepal. In any case,

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47. Parvati Vasudevan, "India and Her Neighbours", *IDSA Journal*, Vol, XVI (July-September) 1983, p. 36.

48. *Ibid*,



Sri Lanka's location was too strategic to lose control of by way of intolerance. Also the nascent democratic process in Sri Lanka might have evoked certain amount of indulgent attitude of India toward Sri Lanka.

We are left with another task in our historical survey in understanding how India developed a stake in the present Tamil crisis. To put the record straight, Indian leadership was initially drawn in the Tamil crisis rather reluctantly by the Sri Lankan elites, that also over the plight of the Indian Tamils who were the descendents of the Indian Tamil plantation workers imported by the British in the tea estates. The Sri Lankan emerging elites were reluctant to extend voting rights to the Indian Tamils even as early as in 1931 when universal franchise was introduced in Sri Lanka to raise people's political consciousness toward self-government. On independence, India was requested to take the large number of stateless Indian Tamils. India, however, did not agree to the proposal initially because that would have implied in principle repatriation of a large number of Indians from Burma, Malaya and Africa. Eventually, India agreed to the principle of repatriation from Ceylon and through a series of talks and negotiations on the insistence of Sri Lankan Government who was all eager to get rid of the Indian Tamils as soon as possible. The 1954 Indo-Ceylon Agreement was signed consequently. The agreement, however, remained dead letters for all practical proposes. The 1964 Shastri-Srimavo Agreement and 1974 Indira-Srimavo Agreement also met the the same fate.

What however was important is that through these negotiations and agreements, an outwardly reluctant India was made an essential party in the nation building process of Sri Lanka. In other words the Sri Lankan elites intended to distance themselves from India in their nation building efforts by making India agree to take back the Indian Tamils<sup>49</sup> but they ended up involving India in otherwise

49. To be precise this was the line of thinking of D. S. Senanayake while S.W. R. D. Bandarnaike was strongly in favour of resolving the problem within Sri Lanka and without involving India in her internal affairs. It was on the issue over which Bandarnaike broke away from UNP and formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1951.



settling the nationality question. India at once became the guardian of the (Indian) Tamil community in Sri Lanka. This was simply made possible by an extension of antipathy toward the whole Tamil community on the part of the Sinhalese and an extension of sympathy and legitimate interest toward the whole Tamil community on the part of India. The Sinhala only Act of 1956, land settlement measures, standardisation of education in Sinhale and Tamil language, employment policies - all led to systematic deprivation and alienation of the Sri Lankan Tamils. To be precise, however the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamil did not evoke as much protest from the central Government of India as from Tamil Nadu except on occasions of severe riots until the decisive July 1983 riots in Sri Lanka. But then India had already acquired the weapon of dealing with such problem—humanitarian consideration which could easily be extended to the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Finally, one turning point in Indo-Sri Lanka relations was the 1977 general elections in Sri Lanka that brought Jayewardene's UNP to power. Although Janata Government in India is said to have good rapport with Jayewardene, the fact remains that on return to power in 1980, Mrs. Gandhi missed Mrs. Srimavo Bandarnaike with whom she had very good personal rapport. The UNP Government brought in its trail many other changes like open economy and private enterprise that brought to an end the image of traditional socialistic policies in economy and paved way for inflow of more (Western) capital in Sri Lanka to the uneasiness of India. Finally, when the Jayewardene Government turned itself into executive Presidency in 1982 that signalled the end of a Westminster-type of parliamentary democracy which India had been so proudly nurturing and rise of the type of regime and the political culture of her immediate neighbourhood she had been critical about.

From the brief survey of Indo-Sri Lankan relations in historical perspective, it turns out that the relations never came to a boiling point, yet there were deep-rooted suspicion and misgivings between



the two. For Sri Lanka, it was basically the question of defending cultural, religious and ethnic identity from being swamped by that of India combined with the bad memories of repeated armed incursions from the mainland so much so that at one stage Sri Lanka made an abortive attempt at identifying with South East Asia by trying to join the ASEAN. It was only when there was prospect of the seven countries of South Asia joining together within the framework of a regional cooperation that she showed her interest to come back to the South Asian fold. Even then she did not hesitate to give it at least a warning jolt in July 1985 by almost boycotting the SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting.

For India it is ethno-religio-linguistic tie plus something more: suspicion that Sri Lanka might act a manner detrimental to her security interest. Or, something else also ? Perhaps a desire to test her capability to manage regional affairs herself ? This is what we are turning to now.

## THE TAMIL ETHNIC CRISIS AND INDIAN RESPONSE

We have earlier indicated that the Sri Lankan Tamil problem did not figure that prominently in the Indo-Sri Lankan relations until July 1983, although the Sri Lankan Tamils always looked toward north to India specially Tamil Nadu, for moral support and India also provided undeclared moral support to the TULF demand for civic and political rights in Sri Lanka. India also occasionally expressed concerns over the plight of the Tamil people. This kept India and Sri Lanka emotionally separate. But it was during July 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka that India's stake and role consciousness in the crisis were heightened, Sri Lanka's mistrust and fear about India was sharpened and the Tamils' expectation that Indian would come as their saviour was also raised. To understand the centrality of India, which India itself has been claiming, it would be pertinent to briefly recount the crisis period of Indo-Sri Lankan relations during July- August 1983.



*July-August 1983 Crisis Period* : We are not going into the details of the riots, extent of killings and damages in the late July riots in Sri Lanka. What is done here is to trace the events leading to development of the major hitch between India and Sri Lanka.<sup>50</sup> Situation in Jaffna and other adjoining areas began to deteriorate in May-June 1983 following local elections. Statewide emergency was imposed in May 1983 and army activities in the north also increased leading to reported rampage and ambushed killing of 13 security men in Jaffna. The alleged army atrocities in the north provoked Indian protest even before the July 25 episode throughout the country. On July 23, Mrs. Gandhi told a gathering in Madras that India did not wish to interfere in the domestic affairs of Sri Lanka but "cannot help feeling distressed about the prevailing situation regarding the people of Indian origin there."<sup>51</sup> The July 25 riot that left hundreds dead thousands homeless roused strong emotions in Tamil Nadu and also in New Delhi. An all-party conference was convened in Madras on July 28 and the meeting decided to send a delegation to New Delhi to seek "intervention by the government of India" to put an end to the ethnic clashes in Sri Lanka.<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Gandhi assured the 16-member Tamil Nadu delegation that the Centre was dealing with the problem as a national issue and as a mark of Centre's sympathy and solidarity with Tamil Nadu, all central government offices in the state would remain closed during the state-wide *bandh* on August 2. But more dramatic events were reported from Colombo. The apprehension about a possible Indian invasion in rescue of the Tamils was looming large in Colombo and this obtained a heightened publicity in India. The New Delhi-based *Hindustan Times* carried a UPI report dated August 2, 1983 which said : "Riot battered Sri Lanka appealed for pledges of military assistance from the United States, Britain, Pakistan and Bangladesh

50. This section draws on the excellent compilation of events in Ghani Jafar, *op. cit.* pp. 44-52

51. *Indian Express*, 24 July 1983.

52. *Statesman*, 29 July 1983.



in case of a foreign attack, highly placed government sources said today."<sup>53</sup>

India lost no time calling not only the heads of missions of countries mentioned in the above report but also of as many as 26 other countries to explain India's position in the crisis and to warn any interested quarters to keep off the crisis.<sup>54</sup> The upshot of the series of meetings was what appeared in a big captioned news in *Times of India*, August 3 which read "hands-off Sri Lanka"<sup>55</sup>

While Sri Lankan Government denied such reports, the then Indian External Affairs Minister, Mr. Narasimha Rao nonetheless announced in the Parliament on August 2:

We are looking into all aspects of these reports and are also in touch with several governments, including those specified in the press reports, to emphasise the nature of India's concern at the existing situation in Sri Lanka and at the possible future course of developments, including any foreign involvement in the region. The response of those to whom we have spoken is favourable. As for our relation with Sri Lanka, I have already said that the Sri Lankans have told us they understand our views and position and the question of Sri Lanka needing any assistance against India simply cannot arise. If Sri Lanka needs our assistance, that is another matter, on which the two governments will remain in touch.<sup>56</sup>

Mrs. Gandhi had a telephonic talk with President Jayewardene in which she brought two important issues to the fore front. First she told Jayewardene not to regard India as "just another country" with reference to the Sri Lankan problem of Tamils, a statement

53. Quoted in Ghani Jafar, *op. cit*, p. 49.

54. All the four countries denied they had been asked for any such assistance. See the *Hindu*, 2 August 1983.

55. *Times of India*, 3 August 1985.

56. Quoted in Ghani Jafar, *op. cit*, p. 49.



that climaxed the process that started with the reluctant acceptance of any role in the Tamil issue after independence. Second, she asked the Sri Lankan President : "Would you mind if my Foreign Minister Sri Narasimha Rao, travels to Sri Lanka today, and could you have discussions with him"? Jayewardene replied : "I would welcome your Foreign Minister".<sup>57</sup> Thus Sri Lanka accepts India's mediation role, grudgingly though.

All these led to the articulation of 'Regional Security : Indian Doctrine' in *India Today* as referred to earlier and all these saw the beginning of 'low key' operation of the doctrine in the case of Sri Lanka.

Although a period of anti-climax followed this crisis as Narasimha Rao's visit was followed by visit of Jeyewardene's brother Hector Jayewardene to New Delhi and subsequent acceptance of India's good-offices in the mediation by G. Parthasarathi leading to the abortive all-party conference in January 1984, the debate on armed intervention went on intermittently both in Colombo and New Delhi. Exactly one year later in August 1984, the fear of invasion was again talked about. Mrs. Gandhi told the Parliament on August 16, 1984 :

It was not India's intention to interfere in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka but it would not be a silent and disinterested spectator to this grim tragedy when so many innocent Tamils with strong filial ties with their brethren in South India were killed, rendered homeless and treated in this inhuman fashion.<sup>58</sup>

Mr. Ram Niwas Mirdha, the then State Minister of External Affairs, also told the Parliament on the same day that India was keeping a "close watch on the evolving situation and will take whatever steps called for".<sup>59</sup> Mrs. Gandhi also wrote to President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher, expressing her deep concern over the developments in Sri Lanka and their inevitable repercussion on India. The governments of several other countries were also being kept

57. *Ibid.*

58. *IDSA News Review on South Asia/Indian Ocean*, September 1984, p. 448

59. *Ibid.*, p. 451.



informed about the grave consequences of the Sri Lankan bid to seek a military solution to the island's ethnic problem. The purpose of the diplomatic move was to make it clear that India could not remain silent over what was happening in Sri Lanka because "the two were vitally linked together" as she remarked earlier in 1983.

Consequent upon this the Sri Lankan fear of an invasion also grew louder. In an interview on August 23, Sri Lankan Security Minister, Athulathmudali said that there was tremendous apprehension among the Sinhalese about possible invasion.<sup>60</sup>

The invasion did not come true in any case and India was soon to be engulfed in the tragedy of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in October 1984. During this period, no major development in Indo-Sri Lankan relations took place. It took some more months for Rajiv to consolidate his home front through the December 24, 1984 general elections and only then Rajiv Gandhi could look beyond frontiers. Rajiv era saw somewhat different approach to the crisis.<sup>61</sup>

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60. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

61. Rajiv's becoming the Prime Minister of India raised a lot of optimism even in Sri Lanka about a possible solution of the problem. Said a Sri Lankan scholar : The present time seems more propitious than ever before, for India has at its helm at present a leader not only unconstrained by the trammels of the past, but also very firmly and sincerely committed to improving relations with neighbouring countries. Rajiv factor must be recognized as one of the important variables in the entire direction which the SARC exercise will take in the coming months. And indications are there that we are in fact witnessing a new course in Indian foreign policy devoted to the twin objectives of reducing, if not eliminating, Superpower presence in the region and finding acceptable policy of accommodation with neighbours.

Moreover, Rajiv Ghandhi's massive electoral victory at the Lok Sabha polls in December 1984 has made him a political force in his own right not only in India but outside it as well.

Shelton U. Kodikara "Regional Roles and Behaviour in South Asia : A Theoretical Framework of Regional Cooperation." *op. cit.*



*India's Stake:* India's stakes in the Tamil ethnic crisis are manifold. The domestic political compulsions vis-a-vis Tamil Nadu is perhaps the most critical. With a population as large most of the European countries, Tamil Nadu is crucial to any government in New Delhi. It may be mentioned that Rajiv Gandhi's ruling Congress (I) party controls no state in the south excepting a coalition government in Tamil Nadu with Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran's AIDMK. This delicate power balance (or imbalance?) has created a leverage on the Centre not only for the ruling AIDMK but also for the opposition parties, most vocal of whom is DMK led by former Chief Minister Karunanidhi.<sup>62</sup> Another leverage is a strong Tamil Nadu lobby in the Centre. Tamil Nadu has produced a good number of influential leaders, MPs and government servants. In retrospect it was from Tamil Nadu that the demand for Indian invasion in aid of Sri Lankan Tamils was made and pressure was put on the Centre. The Centre did not yield but very debate in the Parliament intensified the fear-psychosis in Sri Lanka that eventually led to the pronouncement of the so-called Indian doctrine. A sample of demands of Tamil MPs in the Parliament may be illustrative :

- DMK asked for severance of diplomatic relations and taking of economic and military action against Sri Lanka.<sup>63</sup>
- Mr. Kulandivalu of AIDMK asked for recongition of the TULF in the pattern of what was given to SWAPO of Namibia.<sup>64</sup>
- Some DMK members asked for expulsion of Sri Lanka from the Non-aligned Movement and some for raising the issue at the UN.<sup>65</sup>

It was again from Tamil Nadu that strong pressure compelled the Centre and state government of revoke deportation order for some of the Tamil militant leaders from Madras. Following the deportat-

62. *South*, April 1986, p. 29

63. *Times of India*, 7 April 1985

64. *Times of India*, 30 April 1985.

65. *Ibid.*



tion order, Mr. Karunanidhi said : "The people of Tamil Nadu will certainly not tolerate it if Rajiv Gandhi tries to ram a solution down the throat of the Sri Lankan Tamils.<sup>66</sup> The success of the anti-deportation campaign worried the ruling AIDMK leading Ramachandran to hold an almost state-sponsored Tamil *bandh* which eventually succeeded in softening the Centre's stand to revoke the deportation order.

Also it was mainly in the face of a barrage of questions and protests from the Tamil MPs in the Parliament that former External Affairs Minister Bali Ram Bhagat used the expression "elements of genocide" regarding the activities of the Sri Lanka security forces in north and eastern provinces and threatened to take up issue of human rights abuse with the UN.<sup>68</sup>

There has always been a popular feeling in Tamil Nadu that the Centre was not doing enough for the Tamils in Sri Lanka and such popular sentiments were being reflected in politics as well. The AIDMK government in Tamil Nadu recently warned the Congress (I) that the sole reason for its defeat in late March 1986 municipal election was the electorate's frustration with the state and Centre's soft pedalled policy toward Sri Lanka.<sup>69</sup>

Apart from Tamil Nadu's emotional entrenchment because of "filial connections" the Tamils in Tamil Nadu consider the event of success of the Sri Lankan Tamils as a political victory of the Tamils in the greater geopolitical context, invoked mainly by historical memories. A second and most important reason perhaps is the matter-of-fact issue of fishing in the Palk Strait since Tamil economy is dependent on fishing and marine activities to a great extent. The handing over of Kachchativu to Sri Lanka by India has been a major cause of resentment to the Tamil fishermen who incidentally fish mainly

66. *India Today*, 15 October 1985, p. 84

67. *Ibid*,

68. *South*, April 1986, p. 30.

69. *India Today* 31, March 1986, p. 95.



small prawns near the Sri Lankan coasts. Increased military activities off Jaffna coast by Sri Lankan security forces, specially the unilateral imposition of naval surveillance zone by Sri Lanka has been a positive threat to Tamil Nadu fishermen. The National Association of Fishermen of India suggested the restoration of India's sovereignty over Kachchativu for the safety of the India fishermen.<sup>70</sup> The Rameswaram fishermen are perhaps more militant and they were threatening to capture Kachchativu and flag there.<sup>72</sup> To some extent perhaps this is the reason why India did not agree to the Sri Lankan proposal of joint patrolling for checking arms and militants' infiltration to Sri Lanka and stemming flow of refugees to Tamil Nadu.<sup>72</sup> Such a presumption is substantiated by the fact that instead India itself intensified its naval patrolling and vigilance in the troubled water. In any case, at the perceptual level Tamil Nadu poses a dilemma not only for the Sri Lankan Government but also for the Indian Government. Lanka looks at Tamil Nadu as obstructing understanding between the Sinhalese Tamills and the Sinhales, obstruction of understanding between Colombo and New Delhi and more importantly, as representing New Delhi.<sup>73</sup> This puts an additional burden on India's role playing to which we return in a moment. India's dilemma on the other hand is reflected in the need not to be seen as indulgent toward the Tamil guerillas on the one hand and the need to placate the Tamil sentiments of Tamil sentiments of Tamil Nadu on the other.<sup>74</sup>

A second and obvious stake of India in the crisis arises from the Tamil refugees which according to Indian counting had been steadily swelling. Recent figures of the refugees put by India stood at

70. *Times of India*, 18 March 1985.

71. *India Today*, 15 November 1984.

72. The other reasons might be reluctance of India to agree to proposal not initiated by herself and the subtle problems in dealing with the Tamils militants based in Madras and other parts of Tamil Nadu.

73. See Umashankar Phadnis "India's Position: Sincere, Helpful", *World Focus*, No. 57 (September) 1984, pp. 23-25.

74. *The Economist*, 29 January 1985 p, 22.



1, 24, 828.<sup>75</sup> The most severe problem that India claims to have been posed by the refugees is the economic burden and recently New Delhi is learned to have asked Colombo to share the expenses of their upkeep.<sup>76</sup> A second problem is one of law and order about which the state government is becoming increasingly aware. The internecine fighting among the near-dozen Tamil guerilla groups based in Tamil Nadu is well-known.<sup>77</sup> A new dimension of law and order associated with the refugees is the reported anti-social activities like smuggling.<sup>78</sup> But the Tamil refugees do not have all problematic stake for India. The steadily rising figure of refugees goes in favour of the Indian argument that Jayewardene regime is bent on only a military solution of the crisis which in turn renders thousands and homeless and fear-stricken to flee to Tamil Nadu. Secondly, presence of refugees in Tamil Nadu is a trump card in New Delhi's hand to put pressure on Colombo to come to a political resolution of the crisis so that a congenial atmosphere is created for the refugees' safe return to their home. Thirdly, so long the refugees are there Tamil separatists can easily mix up with them and pass for refugees creating less embarrassment for New Delhi.

Finally, no less important a stake is India's security concern emanating mainly from Sri Lankan security postures in terms of bringing in external elements in aid to security forces which in India's perception have the potential of destabilising the region. Sri Lanka's security posture will be dealt with separately in the succeeding section. Suffice it to say have that India's own role perception and role playing emanate from such a high stake.

75. *India Today*, 31 March 1986, p. 95.

76. *Ibid.*

77. For an interesting exposition of ideological and other divergences among the guerillas based in Tamil Nadu see *India Today*, 31 March 1984, pp. 88-94. *India Today* incidentally came under criticism for such an exposition otherwise leads to an admission that the guerillas are based in Tamil Nadu, a fact that New Delhi has consistently denied.

78. For details see *Sunday* report captioned "Exit Ideology, Enter Adventurism" dated 23-29 March 1986, pp- 48-49.



*Role Perception and Role Playing* : There is a significant amount of continuity in role perception and role playing in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis between Mrs. Gandhi and her successor Rajiv Gandhi. We have earlier seen the way Mrs. Gandhi sort of imposed the good offices of India through the person of Narasimha Rao and then G. Parthasarathi on Sri Lanka because "every development in Sri Lanka affected India also. For in this matter, India could not be regarded as just another country. The two were vitally linked together."<sup>79</sup> G. Parthasarathi took as many as four separate missions to Colombo and several others to Madras. President Jayewardene himself had discussions with Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi on two occasions - first in November 1983 during meeting of the Commonwealth heads of government and then in June 1984 on his way to Colombo from visit to USA. The all-party conference was basically considered as the outcome of this mediatory role. India's mediatory role had certain advantages as also conceded, grudgingly though by Sri Lanka. India's policy was guided by the consideration of not to lose control over any of the contending parties. Parthasarathi, himself a Tamil, had good rapport with the Tamil separatists. However there were enough misgivings in Sri Lankan mind about India's good offices, even in the person of G. Parthasarathi. Although Parathasarathi was able to persuade Jayewardene to place Annexure 'C' to the Constitution as an agenda of all party-conference, the proposal was not accepted by Sri Lankan opposition, even by the ruling UNP members. The Sri Lankan misgivings regarding Indian good-offices centred around the suspicion that, (a) Indian proposals were biased toward the Tamils, (b) India was harbouring the Tamil separatists in Madras, training and arming them, and (c) India tried to impose a solution on the Sri Lanka. Such feelings were exacerbated by occasional statements in New Delhi considered to be adverse and unfriendly toward Sri Lanka. During Mrs. Gandhi's rule role playing was characterized by (a) continued mediatory role, (b) launching an international campaign in different forms aimed at (i) projecting the humanitarian

79. *The Statesman*, 6 August 1983.



aspect of the problem and (ii) denying Sri Lanka of any arms aid by foreign government and agencies.

Rajiv's role playing however, differed significantly from that of his mother. His immediate priority appeared to be to gain confidence of all concerned including the Sri Lankans. Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari was put in the place of G. Parthasarathi. His initial flexible approach was reflected in his welcoming Athulathmudali to New Delhi in place of Jayewardene who declined an invitation for talks on the ground that no talks could be held with India till she renounced the harbouring the Tamil terrorists. Rajiv's handling of the Zaire cargo arms drama in Trivandram airport won him sincere laurel from Sri Lanka. Jayewardene became apparent convinced that Rajiv wanted a solution of the crisis.

Like his mother, Rajiv also said categorically that India had no intentions of invading Sri Lanka but he was more categorical about Sri Lanka's misgivings about supporting the Tamil terroristes' demand a separate state, *Eelam*.

One notable achievement of Rajiv was perhaps bringing about a cessation of hostilities and arranging a series of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatist groups in Thimpu in June and August 1985. Sri Lankan confidence in Rajiv's mediatory role was raised quite high following his categorical statement about the Tamil separatist demand. He held that India did not support the idea of a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka or a federal structure. He was recorded as saying "The maximum we can talk about is what is available in the states of India" meaning the union run territories.<sup>80</sup> As a gesture toward meeting the demand of Sri Lanka, he issued deportation order to the major militant Tamil leaders based in Madras. The peak of the honeymoon was the beginning of June 1985 when both Rajiv and Jayewardene visited tornado devastated Urrirchar in Bangladesh both as a mark of sympathy and as symbolic of understanding of each other's position.

80. *The Economist*, 9 June 1985, p. 22.



Underlying Rajiv's role of honest broker, there was, however the same type of concern, same pattern of perception of the Jayewardene regime as his mother. On many occasions he voiced his concern over Sri Lanka's insistence on military solution of the Tamil problem. He has also been very critical of Colombo's attempts to beef up defence with the help of USA, UK, Pakistan, China and Israel.

A major hitch developed interestingly after the SAARC summit when India began to develop an the impression that Sri Lanka was not interested in India's good offices. That feeling was intensified when Jayewardene on return from the SAARC summit stepped up military operation in the north and eastern provinces. Visit of Pakistan President Zia-ul-Huq also took place around this time forging close relationship between the two countries. Role conscious Rajiv even went on record as saying, while he was visiting Maldives in March 1986 that Sri Lanka could tell if it was no longer intersted in India's good offices. Although Colombo tried to placate Rajiv's hurt feelings by reiterating that India had the advantage of having a leverage over the Tamils, problem developed on another front. Signals reportedly came from Colombo that it was ready to discuss the three central issues as contained in the amended proposal worked out between Romesh Bhandari and TULF : land settlement issue, law and order responsibility and merger of east and northern provinces. But when Bhandari left for Colombo for further discussion on this development an envoy from Jayewardene reached New Delhi with a proposal considered by India as entirely different from what was earlier indicated and the initiative aborted. India's reaction was quite sharp. Former External Affairs Minister Baliram Bhagat said in the parliament that there was an element of genocide in the crisis. Bhagat also asked Colombo for a definite time table for the political solution of the crisis.<sup>81</sup> Colombo reacted by saying that due to Bhagat's statement, "the value of the proferred good-offices of Indian Government stand impaired and its credilihty dilu-

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81. *India Today*, 31 March 1985, p. 94.



ted.'<sup>82</sup> Indian Government then put the seal on its abrupt about-turn by stopping the Indian cricket team from participating in the Asia Cup tournament in Colombo.

The basic problem between India and Sri Lanka on the Tamil problem is one of difference in approach and that in turn originates from certain amount of doubt about intentions of each other. The position of the Sri Lanka Government is that terrorism and violence is something to which it can not reconcile. Its approach has been to deal with military problem militarily. At least at the rhetorical level Sri Lanka holds that it is even ready to discuss Eelam and Sri Lanka was "not insisting that they renounce their demand for a separate state" but they must give up violence and come to negotiation table.<sup>83</sup> Once they give up violence the army would be put back to barracks and the emergency regulations and naval surveillance will be slackened. Regarding TULF, Sri Lanka says, they must come to Sri Lanka and make their campaign to the Sinhalese and Tamil people. The Sinhalese are deeply prejudiced by extremism association of India with that.

India on the other hand holds that it does not support terrorism and it is not for *Eelam*. But at the same time it insists that unless Government stops army atrocities and unless there is definite direction for equitable solution so that the refugees can go back home safely and live with peace and dignity, the efforts toward eradicating violence would be fruitless. To this effort India has been offering its good offices to bring contending parties to the negotiating table to find a political solution. It is also because of its interest in a political solution that India does not want to lose leverage of the Tamil terrorists as indicated earlier. But in Sri Lanka's scheme of things, that is military component and political component of the Tamil crisis, India fits with the military component and she reduces Indian role to just one of denying sanctuary to the Tamil separatists to and exerting pressure on the extremists to stop violence. It is under severe pressure on the

82. *Ibid.*

83. Interview in the Hindu reproduced in *Strategic Digest*, March 1986.



military front that she accepts India's role in the political solution of the crisis. There is then basic deference of approach and perception of role of each other in the crisis.

Of late there is a growing realisation in New Delhi that their soft pedalling toward Sri Lanka has not been sufficiently paid off. In hindsight, Mrs. Gandhi told the Tamil Nadu leaders in August 1983 that "Several options were open to us", but we have to think about what option is appropriate, and what should be its timing.<sup>84</sup> India has been applying one option after another—carrot and stick by Mrs. Gandhi and soft-pedalling by Rajiv Gandhi. The current realisation in the wake of apparent failure of soft option significantly coincides with similar realisation in New Delhi on other issue domestic and regional. For a variety of complicated reasons, Rajiv's policies of bringing changes in approach to domestic and regional issue do not seem to work well and there is every possibility that Rejiv will follow his mother.<sup>85</sup> In such a situation the options open to New Delhi might be limited ones like (a) economic blockade, (b) naval blockade (c) allowing Tamil Nabu to deal with Sri Lanka which means allowing the Tamil separatists to mount more intensified attack on Sri Lanka ; (d) intensifying international campaign against Sri Lanka and projecting the Tamil crisis as a humanitarian case and (e) finally, the still imponderable military option. All these are hard-lining and overlapping options and each has its own implications for

84. Quoted in Ghani Jafar, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

85. The author argued in similar line elsewhere in the first half of 1985. See, Khan, *op. cit.* In recent days there is an interesting array of similar analysis but in normative vein. See, for example, Bhambani Sen Gupta, "Has the Son Begun to Set?", *Expanse International* (New Dehli), April 1986 ; Girilal Jain, "Politics of Rajiv Ghandhi *Mainstream*, 1 March 1986; and S.D. Muni", Rajiv Gandhi's Neighbourhood Policy, *Mainstream*, 22 February 1986. Muni's article concludes : "It is time that our neighbourhood policy was rethought not necessarily to revert back to Indira Gandhi's style, but certainly to reflect the basic framework of India's interests in the region which has evolved through the past four decades."



both the countries and the region at large. Which one India may apply would depend on prevailing circumstances and India's perception of the situation.

At one time there was some partial unofficial economic blockade when port workers in Madras refused to load Sri Lankan ships. The Lankan port workers in retaliation boycotted Indian ships. India maintains in general favorable terms of trade with Sri Lanka by a ratio of 4 : 1<sup>86</sup> so that India loses quite in economic blockade. But the fact remains that any economic blockade against Sri Lanka would affect Sri Lanka more adversely than India. However, given the desperate situation Jayewardene is facing and the agility he has shown in the crisis, it is unlikely that the economic blockade will bring in the desired result from Indian point of view.

Naval blockade would be a very delicate choice and that would depend on India's policy toward the Tamil refugees Tamil separatists in particular. Even if the refugees pose serious economic burden on India it is unlikely that she will close the doors by a naval blockade. Moreover, as India becomes fully convinced that Colombo is bent on a military solution and as she realizes that the Jayewardene regime's military capability despite the major defence build-up is not decisive vis-a-vis the terrorists, India may increase naval activities and surveillance which is likely to go in favour of the refugees and separatists.

Allowing stepped up guerrilla activities from Tamil Nadu bases may take different forms if the Indian Government decides to do so. These may be indirectly providing naval cover to the guerillas to step up their activities or at least overlooking what they do. These could perhaps be covered by usual diplomatic disclaimers that there have not been any Tamil militant bases on Indian soil. However, further military assistance like providing arms could be diplomatically awkward. In all likelihood, indirect and moral support to the guerillas would fit well in the current realities. Perhaps the stakes of India

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86. *The Hindustan Times*, 30 August 1984.



at the moment are not that high as to warraunt a direct military action. But then the stakes may be heightened any time and those are not contingent on the Tamil crisis alone, though they may be related to the crisis. We would be turning to this in a moment. Before that it may be mentioned that as military atrocities in Sri Lanka increases and the refugee figures swell, India will find it more advantageous politically and diplomatically to launch a more vigorous humanitarian campaign which she is unfailingly doing in every forum. Humanitarian issues fit well in India foreign policy and they also helps create the field for applying hard lining options.

### SRI LANK'AS DEFENCE BUILD-UP

One significant trend that has been discernible since the crisis in Sri Lanka started has been the ever increasing defence build-up by Sri Lanka in terms of increased defence spending, expansion in the size of the armed forces, raising of new paramilitary forces, defence procurement, training programme and induction of foreign military agents for training and beefing intelligence machinery.

As may be evident from Table 1, there has been significant rise in defence spending over the last few years, specially in the 1980s. In 1982, Sri Lanka's defence budget was \$ 40.7m and it rose to \$ 206.1m in 1985 indicating a five fold increase. In terms of percentage share of GNP, it rose from 1 percent to 3 percent over the period. The size of the army has grown and so has grown the size of the armed reserve forces and paramilitary. Navy and ariforce have also grown in size. What however, is not reflected in the table is some of the recent arms procurement drives and measures for training of the armed forces and paramilitia. Available reports suggest that Pakistan has been the major supplier of arms for Sri Lanka followed by UK, China, Singapore, Israel. From Pakistan the equipments included heavy and medium artillery including 25-pounder field guns, rocket-propelled grenades and recently there has been promise of 6 helicopter



gunships.<sup>87</sup> Following Jayewardene's visit to China, Sri Lanka obtained 5 naval vessels which would strengthen the already existing 7 Shanghai II class attack craft. From UK the procurement includes 10 naval gunships while from Italy it obtained 6 SIA Marchetti combat air crafts and 6 Cessna 337s for training and surveillance.<sup>88</sup>

Along side defence procurement also important has been the raising of paramilitia for the eastern and northern provinces and induction of foreign military agents for training and beefing up defence intelligence and communication. Available reports suggest that Sri Lanka has already raised 10,000 auxiliary forces including 5000 home guards and a few companies of Special Task Force. SAS agents recruited from Britain are engaged in training the STF and one company has already been deployed in Baticaloa. The Mossad agents from Israel are engaged in the north to beef up communication and intelligence networks.<sup>89</sup> Other training measures include sending of officers and other ranks for training in Pakistan. In 1985 above 800 officers, JCOs and other ranks got training in counter-insurgency, artillery, junior commander training and returned to Sri Lanka.<sup>90</sup>

The question is what all this means for Sri Lanka itself and its relationship with India. For Sri Lanka obvious impact would be one sharpening of the defence-development dilemma. The increased defence bills in recent years have been footed by diverting resources from developmental programmes as also indicated by Jayewardene himself :

If we do not occupy the border it will come to us. We have to act before they surround us. We may have to equip ourselves to do so at the cost of development and social and economic-welfare plans.<sup>91</sup>

87. *India Today*, 31 March 1986, p. 95.

88. *Time of India*, 4 February 1985.

89. *The Economist*, 13 April 1985, pp. 19-20.

90. *India Today*, 31 March 1986, p. 95.

91. *Asian Recorder*, 14-20 May 1985, p. 18322.



The Sri Lanka economy has already begun to feel the pinch accentuated by a fall in the international price of tea, Sri Lanka's major export item.

Table 1. Sri Lanka's Defence Build-up, 1982-85

Item	1982	1983	1984	1985
Population (m)	14.9	15.5	15.8	16.2
Defence spending (US \$m)	40.7	76.0	102.2	206.1
Def/GNP (%)	1.0	1.0	2.5	3.0
Armed Forces	16,425	16,560	16,560	21,540
Reserve	17,000	15,581	15,582	16,100
Army	11,000	11,000	11,000	13,900
Navy	2,825	2,960	2,960	3,960
Air Force	2,600	2,600	2,603	3,700
Recce Car	18 Saladin+ 15 ferret	18 Saladin+ 15 ferret	18 Saladin+ 15 ferret	18 Saladin+ 12 Daimlar Dingo+ 15 ferret
APC	10 BTR-152	10 BTR-152	10 BTR-152	10 BTR-152
Transport AC	1 sqn	1 sqn	1 sqn	1 sqn
Trg. AC	6 Cessna 6 Chimunk	4 Cessna, 7 Chimunk	4 Cessna 7 Chimunk	6 Cessna 5 Chimunk
Helicopter	1 sqn (7 Bell 206, 2 Bell 476)	1 sqn (7 Bell 206, 2 SA-365,		8 Bell 206, 2-212 attack 2 SA-365
Naval Attack Craft	7 (Shanghai II 1 ex.for. PACG)	7 (Shanghai II	7 (Shan. II)	7 (Shan. II)
Naval Patrol Craft	19 Coastal Craft	31 Costal Craft	26 Coastal Craft 2 large in order	21 Large, 28 Coastal Craft

Source : *Military Balance* (IISS, London), 1982-83 through 1985-86 issues.

The second implication relates to the armed forces in more than one way. The raising of the auxiliary forces and imparting them training by foreign military agents may create not only problem of law and order but also serious fissures within the armed forces as well.



The major constraint that led to putting much more emphasis on recruitment of special paramilitia forces was the apparent inability of the Sri Lankan regular security forces to check violence and terrorist attack on themselves and on the civilian population. To a great extent indiscipline, low morale have been ascribed by observers as the major reason behind their professional incapability. It has also been argued that the Lankan authority does not have sufficient control over them, an allegation based on the fact that during the 1983 rampage, the commanding officers lost control over them. One important reason behind such a state of affair has been the recruitment and subsequent socialisation of the armed forces. Following the 1971 armed insurrection there was an upsurge in recruitment and most of the new recruits were Sinhalese peasants whose socialisation did not get professional mooring and most of them regarded the Tamils as enemy and saw their job a fighting war against the Tamils not restoring law and order. UNP Government's version of this state of affair was that the police and the armed forces had been infiltrated by recruits and nominees of the preceding SLFP Government to such an extent that it was not possible to control them.<sup>92</sup> The Christian Science Monitor quoted a Western official as having said, "With the possible exception of some African countries, Sri Lanka has the worst army of the world"<sup>93</sup>. The Monitor also said that Government officials and diplomats were painfully concerned about the real possibility of a coup.<sup>94</sup> Both the US state Department in a report to the Congress and two British MPs who were guests of the Sri Lankan Government in their report to the British Parliament voiced concern about it as well.<sup>95</sup>

There may be certain reasons behind such an ominous presumption. In the first place, historically, the Sri Lankan armed forces have played no great role in Sri Lankan society as also in India.

92. Jayaratnam Wilson, *op. cit.*

93. Mentioned in *Times of India*, 4 February 1985.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *India Today*, 15 June 1985, pp. 77-78.



Moreover, the serious officers were suspected of plotting a coup and many of them were punished. Even their role in 1971 insurrection have not enhanced their standing.<sup>96</sup> In fact whenever there has been a crisis, the political leadership, probably out of their lack of confidence in the capability of the armed forces looked outward for help as reportedly they tried to do in 1983 but shelved the plan following strong opposition from the armed forces. It is also perhaps because of these considerations that the Government has recruited foreign agents to train the specially raised paramilitias. The scenario is, therefore, a complicated one. On the one hand, with increased defence spending more induction is taking place both as regulars and reserves. The recruits are given quick training to fight a war with the Tamil separation. With less of professional training and more of political motivation the morale of the armed forces is not that encouraging. Conceded a senior armed forces official that with the existing firepower and mobility no more than a holding operation was possible.<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, special emphasis on the paramilitia might cause serious dissension and resentment among the civilians and among the regular armed forces. The induction of foreign military agents, specially the Mossad is generating lot of discontent among the Muslim community in the eastern provinces. The performance of the paramilitias, specially that of the Home Guards, has been equally debatable because of their political orientation. Said an army officer :

What worries us so much is not the fact that they (the paramilitia) are there. They are under the control of political leaders hailing from various districts and almost constitute private armies in some cases. Men like us who take pride in wearing uniform are always apprehensive of such blood thirsty

96. Hugh Tinker, "South Asia at Independence: India Pakistan and Sri Lanka", in Jeyaratnam and Dennio Dalton (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 19.

97. *The Economist*, June 29, 1985, p. 21.



rabblies. What is worse, the army gets tarred for their unruliness.<sup>98</sup>

So the armed forces are getting resentful about the role of the militia. If more and more emphasis is given on the paramilitia the position of the regular security forces might be threatened. Add to it the increased involvement of the armed forces in the civilian affairs. The army has been virtually ruling the north and the east. In August 1984, the government set up a central command in the north for better coordination of security activities with its headquarter in Jaffna. The Joint Commander was to oversee both civilian and military responsibilities which he had aluad been handling as the Coordinating Officer.<sup>99</sup> Such increased civilian responsibility pose serious problem when the question of withdrwal of armed forces to barracks arises.

These trends coupled with the threat of the Tamil militants who are small in number<sup>100</sup> but who are quite capable of hitting the target complicate the scenario. In the possible scenario where a political solution is achieved, it would be very difficult to see how the armed forces will reconcile to a reduced role. On the other hand, in case of a protracted military crisis, the army will get more and more entrenched.

The thing that India is perhaps more concerned about is the fate of Sri Lanka's democracy and the possibility of the moderates like Jayewardene losing control over the tide. The Indian sensibilities are perhaps summed up by an Indian scholar :

The present crisis is a crisis in the ethos of democracy which has prevailed in Sri Lanka all those decades since independence. It is possible to see that the longer it takes to resolve the crisis

98. Quoted in *India Today*, 15 October 1985 p, 90.

99. *Sun*, 8 July 1984 as cited in *IDSA News Review on South Asia/Indian Ocean*, September 1984, p. 458.

100. Estimated to be no more than 3000 hard core fighting force and another 6000 as reservist/active supproters. For some details of profite of the militants see *India Today*, 31 March 1984, PP 88-94.



the more imminent becomes the threat to democracy on the country. If democracy is threatened, both Sinhalese and the Tamils would become victims of a totalitarian state with both ethnic communities denied of human rights which, among other things, would mean for the Tamils a struggle for more interactable. Besides, with all its foreign policy implications the degeneration of the democratic system in Sri Lanka would have obvious repercussion on its relationship with India.<sup>101</sup>

Short of a military take over, a dictatorial regime may also emerge which historically has not been liked by India. Jayewardene ruled out such a possibility when he said in one of his speeches :

In a democracy, the security and administrative services come under the control of the political leaders elected by the people. When such leaders are not elected by the people but they have taken authority by force and keep it by force, it is a dictatorship. I will never adopt such an attitude nor this government will permit this to happen. That is why in the direction of this war, order are ultimately given by elected leaders, whoever may be in the seats of power.<sup>102</sup>

Even then the future political scenario of Sri Lanka remains troubled. In the meantime, within India, the current soft attitude of New Delhi toward the other South Asian regimes of varied types is coming under increasing criticism. Whether this matter to the regime concerned is a different question. Nonetheless political incompatibility or its converse, regime rapprochement is important because significant constituencies in the individual South Asian countries including those Sri Lanka look toward India for at least moral support. This in turn creates hitches in the bilateral relations.

### SRI LANKA'S EXTERNAL SECURITY LINKAGE

*US Connection* : US connection features prominently in Sri Lanka's West leaning policy. Sri Lanka's policy of developing a

101. Umashankar Phadnis *op. cit.*, p. 25.

102. *India Today*, 15 June 1985, pp. 77-78.



free and open economy on the Singapore model brought in its trail liberalisation of foreign exchange, import regulations and offering attractive packages for foreign investors. This in turn, resulted in significant changes in Sri Lankan foreign policy postures from an active international role to an active foreign economic policy.<sup>103</sup> In India's perception such departure from traditional economic and foreign policy direction goes against the long-cherished goal of Non-alignment. More specifically India has been resentful about Colombo's softness toward USA. During the seventh Non-aligned summit Sri Lanka in India's perception was not enough critical about Diego Garcia. Moreover, Sri Lanka's protest was not strong enough when Trincomalee was shown as part of facilities available to US navy in the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Pamphlet. This caused irritation in New Delhi and intensified the suspicion about Trincomalee deal. Along with it there are other issues.

For one, the list of countries from which Sri Lanka reportedly sought military assistance in the wake of the July 1983 riot included USA, though the latter denied of any such request or the possibility of help. Secondly, a series of visits by American officials during this period compounded the tension in Indo-Sri Lankan relations. Such officials included Defence Secretary Casper Weinberger, Special Ambassador General Vernon Walters, Chairman US Senate Defence Appropriation Committee and US Assistant Secretary for South Asia, Howard Schaffar.<sup>104</sup> Such visits engaged the attention of Indian Government and media for a long time and tended to give credence to the report that Sri Lanka was actually giving facilities to Voice of America for security purpose and accepting the tender of US-linked consortium for leasing of the Trincomalee Oil Tank and offering Trincomalee harbour facilities to USA.

103. Anuradha Muni, "Foreign Policy ( of Sri Lanka ): Playgrounds for Israel US and UK" *World Focus*, No 57 (September) 1984, p. 18 also see S. 4. Kodikara, *op. cit*, p. 35-36

104. Kodikara, p. 36



We may look into these issues in somewhat detail. The UNP Government entered into an agreement with the Voice of America in December 1983 under which the US Government was permitted to install six 250KW capacity transmitters on a huge 1000 acres of plot at Mutturajwela, near Kutunayeke international airport. These were in addition to the 1951 agreement with the VOA under which three transmitters of 50KW shortwave capacity have been operated. The new agreement reportedly has given the sole responsibility of management, operation, construction, maintenance and technical improvement of VOA station to US nationals and Colombo has little editorial control over their programme. Defence analysts in New Delhi view the new facilities as a possible communication relay facility between Diego Garcia and Pine Gap communication centre in Australia and deem it capable of jamming India's defence communication system.<sup>105</sup> The defence-oriented theory is further reinforced by the argument that the very low frequency transmitters would be helpful in maintaining communication with submarines which may hide in the bed of deepwaters of Trincomalee harbour without the fear of being detected by sonic devices because temperature of surface waters and deep waters vary quite substantially as to renders sonic detection inoperative. The additional advantage is that the Trincomalee natural harbour and its lagoons can accommodate 15-20 large battleships at the same time. A Soviet journalist quotes Pakistani press to indicate that US government has been "intensively pressurising" Sri Lanka for stationing of several squadrons of F-16 air crafts on the island.<sup>106</sup> A recent report also suggests that US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk and other ships of the US seventh fleet visited the coasts of Sri Lanka that coincided with intensified fighting over the control of strategic Trincomalee.<sup>107</sup>

105. *India Today*, 15 March 1985, p. 95. See, also *the Economist*, 19 January, 1985, p. 22.

106. *Patriot*, 15 August 1985 cited in *IDSANews Review on South Asia the India Occan*, 10 September 1984, p. 460.

107. *South*, April 1986, p. 30.



Although the ships kept away from the insurgency-prone areas, such visits fuelled speculation about Trincomalee. US Government, however, denied publicly that US had any such designs on Sri Lanka. The US position is that US naval ships are permitted to visit Lankan ports just as warships from a variety of countries including India, Iran, Pakistan, USSR, France, FGR, UK and Bangladesh did and no special favour had been available for USA.<sup>108</sup> Indian misgivings perhaps remain despite these disclaimers because the facilities have great military potentials. Indian leaders on many occasions have been critical about such Sri Lankan moves. It may be that the VOA facilities at the moment are purely non-military in nature and that base facilities at Trincomalee are yet to be considered seriously though some Indian quarters believe that Jayewardene regime has been all out for leasing the facilities but it is USA which had been lukewarm. Others however are inclined to put some value to the Trincomalee port facilities, maybe, at some near future date following very fluid situation in the Philippines in the post-Marcos period. But much would also depend on the future course of domestic events in Sri Lanka, specially in the east and northern provinces and other geopolitical realities. The battle front in the recent months has shifted to strategic Trincomalee and the airport areas and so long the areas remain battle-ridden, the importance of the facilities will somewhat be discounted.

The controversy over the Trincomalee Oil Farm consisting of biggest unused oil storage facilities in the Indian Ocean built by the British during WWII with 100 oil storage tanks with a capacity of one million tonne is yet another aspect of the Trincomalee base facilities that created hitch not only for its security implication but also the over manner in which the international commercial deal was finalised.<sup>109</sup> India's point is that she was also a bidder but she was outbidded by manipulation in order

108. Kodikara, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

109. For details, see T. Shreedhar, "Anatomy of Trincomalee Deal", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. III No. 3 (June) 1984, pp. 238-43



to offer the tender to American linked Coastat Corperative Bermuda. Because of objection from the bidders the firm ever got renamed in Singapore and then participated in the tender. The US leaning oil firm is likely to provide refuelling facilities to USA.

Indian concern over the deal, as viewed by an Indian scholar has been guided by the same considerations that India's security interests are coterminous with Sri Lanka and not vice versa and second, a small developing country like Sri Lanka cannot bargain with a superpower as to protect its interest.<sup>110</sup> To the first consideration Jayewardene's response has been:

US navy would not come into Trincomalee. No oil would be sold to military institutions or ships. We would also ask the Indian's to join the consortium. If they have fears about the US navy coming to Trincomalee I cannot help it.<sup>111</sup>

To the Second consideration, Jayewardene's respnse has been : Indian Government kept saying "Don't enter this pact or that". But why should they tell me what I should or should not ? That goes against my grains.<sup>112</sup>

Observers of South Asian politics discount any possibility of US involvment in the present crisis in Sri Lanka. For one, the US administrations since Carter or even before that, have been responsive to India's sensibilities in the region.<sup>113</sup> The US Vice President during his visit to India in May 1984 referred to India as a pivotal power and repeated the assurance of the US Government that it was not encircling India nor in the least destabilising India's strained political system.<sup>114</sup> US interest in Sri Lanka at the moment may be economic, in terms of developing

110. *Ibid*, p. 242

111. *Asian Recorder*, 24-30 June 1984, p. 17815-16

112. *Ibid*

113. Henry Kissinger's famous statement in 1974 that India was a pre-eminent South Asian power may be recalled here, see Muni "Rajiv Gandhi's Neighbourhood Policy", *op. cit.* p. 4

114. *Indian Today*, 15 June 1984, p. 96-97.



a free enterprise system and observers point out that perhaps India will have less objection to US involvement to that extent in view of the fact that Rajiv himself has been quite interested in developing closer economic relations with USA. *The Economist* assessed the triangular relationship in the following manner :

No American President would accept an Indian vet on America's dealings with neighbours. But no American policy that ignores Indian sentiment can succeed.<sup>115</sup>

Could there be a *quid pro quo* relationship between India and USA on India's South Asian neighbours. At least some Indian scholars suspect such elements in India's recent lowering of postures toward its neighbours specially Pakistan and Sri Lanka where US involvement interests are marked. In return, US has been bestowing the role recognition which India had been looking.

There may be other considerations from the point of view of the US. US may make a distinction between her equation with India's neighbours taking India's sensibilities as parameters on the one hand and her long term interest in the region including the broader Indian Ocean context on the other. She may like to keep her options open while at the same time placate Indian sentiments, like not providing any arms to Sri Lanka in relation to the present crisis or advising the Lankan leadership to allow Indian peace initiative work. And that amount of ambivalence on the part of the US would be enough to keep tensions in the triangular relationship alive. Viewed in this perspective, Sri Lanka's soft attitude toward the USA may have some relevance although in the short run link with USA may prove to be a less effective option vis-a-vis India.

**UK Connection :** If US position in her relationship with Sri Lanka has displayed certain amount of ambivalence, perhaps more ambivalent has been UK's position. During the heightened crisis situation in the aftermath of the July 1983 riots in Sri Lanka when

115. *The Economist*, 8 June 1985, pp. 11-12.

116. See Muni op. cit p. 34.



the Lanka government reportedly sought external military assistance from a number of countries including UK, the British foreign office admitted that Britain had received soundings from Sri Lanka about possible assistance and it was being considered. But no clarification was obtained as to what type of a assistance was sought.<sup>117</sup>

This is not to say that the British Government was not sensitive to India's feelings. Britain put a lot of restraint in selling arms to Sri Lanka although Sri Lanka tried its best to invoke the UK-Lanka defence agreement signed in the immediate aftermath of independence of Sri Lanka. Mrs. Thatcher's visit to Sri Lanka in September 1984 was put off and the cancellation was considered by diplomatic circles in Colombo as a demonstration of the British government's displeasure also believed that Mr. Gandhi's letter to Western powers including Mrs. Thatcher might have prompted the cancellation.<sup>118</sup>

The visit, however, was materialised in April 1985 and that also gave rise to a lot of commotion in Indo-Lankan already strained relationship. During the state dinner in however of Mrs. Thatcher, Jayewardene lauded rather passionately the role of Britain in stationing of troops to sustain democracy in Central America and other regions.<sup>119</sup> This was interpreted in New Delhi as Lanka's request for stationing of British troops in defence of democracy in Sri Lanka's.<sup>120</sup>

Both Lanka and UK tried to convince India what the exact situation was. Britain, however, went a step forward to point out that the 1947 agreement did not commit any side in advance without mutual consultation and consent.<sup>121</sup> But then it is also significant that such an interpretation otherwise takes cognizance of the existence of an agreement that could be implemented in specified manner.

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117. The New Nation, ( Dhaka ), 3 August 1983.

118. *IDSANews Review on South Asia/the Indian Ocean*, September 1984. p. 454

119. *Times of India*, 18 April 1985.

120. *Ibid*

121. *Times of India*, 15 April 1985.



*Pakistan Connection :* India's apprehension about a possible encirclement, if not by external powers, but by neighbours, has recently been exacerbated by Sri Lanka's closer relations with Pakistan. Whatever may be the reason, historically Sri Lanka and Pakistan have shown certain amount of affinity that incidentally coincides on a number of points regarding their stand on India. Pakistan and Sri Lanka hold similar views on disarmament, regional security, Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the settlement of the Afghan refugee problem and the twin concepts of South Asia as a nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ) and the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace (IOZOP).<sup>122</sup>

In the early years of independence, Sri Lanka became the port of calls on the 3000-mile ocean route between the two wings of the then Pakistan which had special relevance when overflying India became problematic. During the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971, Sri Lanka allowed transit facilities to movement of Pakistani troops and it voted for the UN resolution of December 7, calling for ceasefire in Indo-Pak war. During the 1971 Trotskyite insurgency in Sri Lanka, Pakistan made small military supplies to Sri Lanka, as of course did India.<sup>123</sup>

The role of Pakistan during the July 1983 crisis seems to be debate but interesting. In an article for a seminar on regional security in Kathmandu in November 1985, Mushahid Hossain of the *Muslim* (Islamabad) quoted a Sri Lankan journalist, Yapa of the *Island* (Colombo):

Only Pakistan came to Sri Lanka's assistance. In 1983 when we requested President Zia for help he said, 'yes...But the question was how to transport that aid. Apparently, PIA refused on the plea that civilian aircrafts were not allowed to carry arms under the Geneva Conventions. We learnt that President Zia told them : Did Sri Lanka invoke Geneva Convention in

122. See *Asian Recorder*, 21-27 May 1985. For detailed description of Pak-Lanka relations, see John Kaniyalil "The Pak-Lanka Connection" *Strategic Analysis*.

123. See *Ibid* p. 1071 Vol IX ( February ) No. II, 1986, pp. 1069-1075.



1971 when they helped us?' This was such a good will gesture which the Sri Lanka people cannot forget.<sup>124</sup>

Since then there have been important developments on the political and military fronts. Each regime seems to be appreciating what the other needs in the South Asian context. Jayewardene during his visit to Pakistan in April 1985 not only called for the creation of an independence Afghanistan but also wished that the "people of Kashmir should be allowed to decide about their future themselves"<sup>125</sup> Such remarks over an issue that apparently is not live between Indian and Pakistan provoked sharp criticism from India. President Zia in return, appealed to the Sri Lankan Muslims to keep supporting the leadership of Jayewardene.<sup>126</sup> Jayewardene regime has tried to use Pakistan factor in winning over the Tamil Muslims in Eastern provinces where the Muslim constitute one-third of the population.

We have earlier indicated about Pakistan support to Sri Lanka's armed forces in terms of training and equipment. Pakistan recently trained 200 members of the newly raised auxillary forces and shipped some Chinese made weapons to Colombo. Said President Zia ul-Huq. "If Pakistan had been an arms exporter we would have helped Sri Lanka."<sup>127</sup> On an earlier occasion, Pakistan naval ship *Alamgir* visited Colombo on a good will mission and the ship was open to visit of the general public.<sup>128</sup>

Apart from political understanding Pakistan and Sri Lanka have profitable trade relations. The Joint Economic Commission between the two countries met for the second time in 1978 and for the third time in 1984. The two countries have a joint venture in gem stone

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124. Quoted in Kaniyalil, p. 1073

125. *Asian Recorder*, 21-27 May 1985.

126. *Ibid*

127. *South*, April 1986, p. 30.

128. *Dawn* 7 August 1984.



industry<sup>129</sup> apart from trade in steel and engineering products, cotton, sugar, tea and betel leaf.<sup>130</sup>

Pakistan factor in Indo-Sri Lankan has not been reflected in clear-cut fashion although in 1971, Mrs. Bandanaiké talked of an Indian invasion as she has been helping Pakistan (later she denied of such apprehension). However, with growing linkage between the two countries, India has begun to voice concern over the expanding military cooperation between Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In what way India may react to further intensified cooperation would depend on the course of events in Sri Lanka and the state of Indo-Pak normalisation problem and above all, the SAARC process. India may not be willing to destabilise either process by introducing a new factor so long it does not perceive Pak-Lanka connections to be posing any serious threat to her security or leads to a ganging up of the neighbours against very spirit of the India doctrine as seen earlier. But closer relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka may as well change the mood of India because she would face Pakistan on two sides.

*Chinese Connections* : Pakistan factor in Indo-Sri Lankan relations has a parallel, that is the China factor although China and Sri Lanka have been traditionally friendly since long. The two countries have similar outlook on many international issues. China provide technical assistance—to Sri Lanka on mainly important projects. Although in 1971, China was initially a suspect in the eyes of may in the communist insurrection her role was later cleared of any misgivings. The rice-rubber barter agreement worked so well for more than two decades although the UNP government pursuant of its private enterprise system and open economic policy ended the barter agreement and introduced cash trade. Yet there is no dearth of political understanding. Following the July 1983 crisis and the tensions that were created China sent a message to Jayewardene reiterating that the crisis was an internal affair of Sri Lanka and no country has any

129. *IDSA News Review on South Asia/Indian Ocean*, September 1984, p. 453.

130. *The Pakistan Times*, 27 August 1984, 404,



right to interfere. The message had clear indication of India's possible role. During Jayewardene's visit to China, two agreements were signed : Joint committee for economic and trade cooperation and another on scientific and technical cooperation. The latter agreement included exchange of specialized personnel and professional training. What was more interesting was the statement during the visit that Sinhala-China relations were an example of how a small country and a big country can arrange their relations to mutual benefits.<sup>131</sup> Obviously such a parallel was a pointer to India's relation with her smaller neighbours.

China has also been supplying some arms to Sri Lanka on a limited scale though in the field of mainly navy as we have seen. The naval crafts, specially the Shanghai II class attack crafts have proved extremely useful in checking the Tamil separatists. A SIPRI study suggests that China has already ordered for 5 new Shanghai II fast attack crafts.<sup>132</sup> Available reports suggest that Sri Lanka has been a recipient of the arms and export company noted for its simple, efficient yet very cost effective arms and equipment like armour piercing ammunition.<sup>133</sup>

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN INDO-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

The future direction of the Indo-Sri Lanka relations remain problematic in any probable scenario. From what has been discussed earlier, it turns out that the strategic aspects of the relations would be governed by the direction of the Tamil separatist movement, domestic political development in Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka's defence and foreign policy postures, role perception and role playing by India and other geopolitical realities.

The Tamil problem first. To an uninitiated, a perusal of the latest development on Tamil ethnic problem would present a paradox :

131. *Asian Recorder*, 15-21 July, 1984, p. 17842.

132. *Asian Recorder*, 21-27 May 1985 p. 18324.

133. *Ibid*



compared to the initial situation, significant development on political fronts have taken place in both positive directions. On the other hand, militarily also the situation has become somewhat intractable. On the positive side, the one that should be readily mentioned is the amount of concessions that the Jayewardene regime seems to be agreeable to make in terms of provincial council compared to the earlier stand of "no more than district council". Even there were signals from Colombo that the major hurdles in terms of (a) land settlement issue (b) law and order and (c) merger of eastern and northern province<sup>134</sup> would be negotiated<sup>135</sup>. There seems to be agreement in principle that land settlement could be in proportion to ethnic group and law and order responsibility can also be taken care of by the provincial council.

The major hurdle seems to be the merger issue which Jayewardene hold to be non-negotiable because that would be tantamount to recognising the Tamil demand of 'traditional Tamil homeland'. One interesting formula was broached with Jayewardene by a reporter.<sup>136</sup> The idea put to Jayewardene was that the gap between the concept of 'homeland' and what the government can offer could be minimised in terms of making certain boundary adjustments which the government occasionally did, and appointing a boundary commission so that the Tamils could feel that they are being compensated in terms of territory. And Jayewardene seemed to be agreeable in principle provided that was not done in the name of "territorial homeland".<sup>137</sup>

The second positive development is somewhat softening of Jayewardene's stand on negotiating with the Tamil separatists. The Thimpu meet through the good offices of India was the beginning. We have seen earlier that Jayewardene's only precondition for

134. *South*, April 1986.

135. The signal apparently was soon retracted by reverting to more or less earlier position.

136. *Strategic Digest*, March 1986, p. 318.

137. *Ibid*



negotiation with the separatists was that they give up violence, not necessarily their demand for *Eelam* which according to him could be talked about at the negotiating table. The point is the separatists, referred to as 'boys' to indicate their insignificance have gained some political weight.

A third positive development is the Indian stand on the Tamil separatist movement and for that matter, *Eelam* and a corresponding of realisation of that by the Tamil separatists. In early part of 1984, Savaratnam of TELO, one of the ENLF components was quoted as saying :

India's security is linked with our liberation. So while India determines the policy, we play the role of good soldiers.<sup>138</sup>

But following Bhandari's success in persuading the Tamils to sit at the negotiating table at Thimpu, the talks eventually failing though, and Rajive's categorical statement regarding Tamil state, the realisation among the Tamil tigers is that they cannot do without India's support. "We will support all efforts by Rajiv Gandhi to settle the ethnic problem. India is our only hope", said S. Chandrahasan, one of the prominent ENLF leaders.<sup>139</sup> EPRLF added :

India will not espouse the Eelam cause. But Rajiv has made it clear that that should not prevent us from asking for *Eelam* at the negotiating table.<sup>140</sup>

A fourth positive aspect is the stand of the moderates who include the TULF leadership as well as some of the guerilla groups including the PLOT. Sometimes the moderate-extremist division is along class lining, the moderates falling in middle and upper middle class. But the fact remains that the common Tamils perhaps do not want a separation as such, although their support to the Tamil separatists is contingent on the army atrocities. So in a future scenario where there would be a political solution, if at all, the moderates will

138. *India Today*, 31 March 1984, pp. 88-94.

139. *India Today*, 15 October 1985. p. 88.

140. *Ibid.*



prevail and the Tamil extremists either will remain so or change their methodology as was the case with the Assam agitators who currently run the state government in India.

But the negative developments are no less important. The first is the military front. To be precise all the positive political developments that have taken place were punctuated by major setbacks and they were inevitably linked with developments on the military front. For one, the Sri Lankan government, side by side with its disposition to substantial political concession, has been entrenched militarily in the crisis with its arms procurement, induction of foreign military agents and closer military cooperation with Pakistan and other countries. And its position has been made repeatedly and consistently clear, "no negotiation so long there is violence". Lanka's strategy is to head off the extremists militarily and then make whatever negotiation with and concessions to the moderates that may be needed. Even if the Government is unable to materialize this goal for the military persistence of the guerillas, Lanka seems to be bent on it by whatever means it can muster. And this happens to be the most sticking point between India and Sri Lanka. A second major negative aspect is that the Sri Lankan Government is not being able to shake off the misgivings and fear-psychosis about India's role and intentions despite whatever Rajiv does and says. Here also the position is clear-cut : so long India harbours the terrorists, India's good-offices stand impaired in the eyes of the Sinhalese. On the other hand, Jayewardene's frantic search for help and assistance on military front is inevitably viewed by India as an anti-India measure in terms of bringing in external elements in the Sub-continental security frame. Moreover, India does not want to lose leverage over the Tamil terrorists for which the Sri Lankan demand for ousting of the terrorists from Tamil Nadu cannot be totally conceded to. The question of the refugees, whatever their number may be, is also linked with it. The latest hardening of attitude on the part of India will certainly compound the problems.



Returning to the Tamil front again, the Tamils also seem to be bent on fighting on so long the Government security forces continue to swoop on them. From available reports it turn out that they are changing the battle tactics to a more frontal one and their strategy is to control territory in which they had been quite successful in the eastern province of Trincomalee. This has certainly enhanced their bargaining stand on the demand for linkage of eastern and northern provinces. Thus, each one of the parties involved in the crisis has a stake on the military front.

Thus there are both positive and negative forces operating in the crisis. It is difficult to predict which one will eventually prevail. In all likelihood, it is going to turn into a protracted crisis and a major break-through is required to halt the trend. In that eventuality, the stakes of the parties concerned in the military front may be raised to such an extent that even attempts toward negotiation and mediation will undergo qualitative changes. The military issues are likely to come to the forefront and much of the mediatory energies will be devoted to cease-fire, withdrawal and similar technical details with the substantive political issues somewhat being relegated. Trends in the recent past are indication of that.

A compounding factor is India's stake in domestic political development of Sri Lanka. Observers admit that the political stability and stamina of Jayewardene is unique in South Asia. Indian point has been that Jayewardene and his UNP government does not face any major opposition from any quarter. They have two-thirds majority in the parliament which could easily change the country's political form (executive Presidency) in 1978 and adopt the sixth constitutional amendment in 1983. Jayewardene has undated resignation letters of his cabinet in his pocket. Even his dismissal of the Buddhist hardliner minister Cyril Mathew did not evoke serious protest from any quarter including the Buddhist clergy which is said to constitute the most hardline segment. Moreover, there will be no election pending till 1989 and Jayewardene himself will not be contesting then.



So there should not be any problem with Jayewardene in pushing through any solution, India argues. But Jayewardene has been arguing that it is almost impossible for him to get through any bill that smacks of any concession to the Tamils.

The dilemma for India is that among the Sinhalese leaders Jayewardene is the most moderate. At 79 he may not last long and a series of succession battle between Prime Minister Premadasa and National Security Minister Athulathmudali would ensue. SLEP which has traditionally been friendly with India has not taken a stand palatable either for the Tamils or for India. And there remains the lurking fear of army take over if not during Jayewardene's life time, maybe after him. It may be pointed out that the democratic values and practices associated with traditional parliamentary democracy have eroded substantially following UNP's changeover to presidential system, depriving Mrs. Bandarnaike of her civil rights and lengthening the life of the parliament by referendum only. Under such a situation, the armed forces will have less moral restraint for take over. Such an eventuality will not be relished by India, not certainly by the Tamils and Sri Lankans who otherwise are peace-loving people. This is a point which would provide the political compulsion to India for a moderating role and for gaining confidence of the Lankan government. The ongoing SAARC process, the political compulsion on the part of India to gain credibility in region as a problem-solver and more importantly, dissuading Sri Lanka from taking any decisive security steps detrimental to her interest would also act in that direction. If such role perception of India may be combined with the positive developments, as mentioned then, however, the Sri Lankan crisis may perhaps be amicably solved and India would not have to bother about a second Pakistan on her southern border.