

DEBATE

CHANGING POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN SRI LANKA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

The recent Presidential Elections in Sri Lanka have thrown-up totally unexpected results. The incumbent President, Mahinda Rajapaksa – who had gambled in calling for elections two years ahead of schedule – lost. The winner, Maithripala Sirisena who was, till a few months ago, a minister in the Cabinet and a member of the President’s party, walked away to head a 49 party rainbow coalition, and managed to defeat the incumbent.

While very few had predicted the outcome almost till the date of voting, the reasons for the dramatic results are now quite clear. Sirisena’s victory margin was indeed thin, but he had made heavy in-roads into the majority Sinhala-Buddhist bastions and, aided by overwhelming support from the minorities – the Tamils and the Muslims – romped home to victory. The aversion to 9 years of almost one-family-rule – one that was becoming more and more authoritarian – was perhaps the main factor. The image of a war-hero who rid the island nation of the scourge of the LTTE did not help Rajapaksa much to retain his post. He was certainly not expected to get the minority Tamil votes, but his failure to address the anti-Muslim activities of Sinhala hard-line groups (like the Bodu Bala Sena) also cost him the traditional votes in that minority segment.

While Sirisena has his role cut out in implementing his election promises in his first 100 days, the need to balance competing demands of the 49 rainbow coalition components could stand in the way.

Internationally, the results have attracted wide attention. For the West, it was the departure of a leader who was defiant in the face of universal criticism regarding the violation of human rights during the closing days of the defeat of the LTTE. For China, it meant the loss of a known person in the position of power, and his replacement by a person who has already declared his intention to correct the ‘over tilt’. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hong Lei, stated that ‘We hope and believe the new government will carry on friendly policies towards China’ – thus betraying an understandable apprehension.

For India, the change is a welcome development. In his congratulatory message to President-elect Sirisena, Prime Minister Narendra Modi indicated India’s expectations from the new President. He wrote - “Your historic victory is a tribute to your vision for Sri Lanka [and] your capacity to connect with *people’s yearning for change* . . . I wish you all the success in building a

peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, on foundations of *genuine and effective reconciliation* (emphasis added).”

In his message, India’s President Pranab Mukherjee referred to India and Sri Lanka being ‘neighbours with civilisational ties, sharing a common history, cultural heritage, interests and values, [and who] have long enjoyed a tradition of close friendship and cooperation’.

There are many issues of interest to India: the need for Sri Lanka to correct its ‘over-tilt’ towards China; the lackadaisical movement towards reconciliation with the Tamil minority; and especially, the political and administrative devolution of power to the Northern province through the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution. Within a few days of his assuming power, the new President has quickly demonstrated his resolve in this direction: he has replaced the Governor, a retired Army General, with a ‘non-military civil servant.’ The new appointee is a long-time diplomat who once served on a Truth Commission.

Within days of the election, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera made New Delhi his first overseas destination after assuming charge. This visit was soon followed by that of the new President Sirisena. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to visit Sri Lanka in March 2015. This will be the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Sri Lanka, a close neighbour, since 1987! Sri Lanka has made the first move. India needs to step-up to the plate, and reciprocate, making sure that it takes Sri Lankan interests also on board.

There has also been a significant change in the internal political scene in India. The new Government, enjoying unprecedented mandate will be less prone to disproportionate pressures from Tamil Nadu’s political parties in exercising Foreign Policy options – as was often seen in the recent past. How will this dramatic change in leadership in Sri Lanka – coming so soon after changes in the political scene in India – affect the India-Sri Lanka relationship? Will the clearly visible pro-Beijing tilt under Rajapaksa be corrected? Will the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka see quick movement towards a satisfactory solution?

The *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* invited a few eminent policy analysts and scholars for their comments on the subject. Their views are published as the ‘Debate’ in the pages that follow in this edition of the Journal.

(The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect the views of the *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)



Time for Change in South Asia

Lakhan Mehrotra*

It is time for change in South Asia. First, Narendra Modi came to the helm of affairs in India last year, riding on the wave of change. That is now followed by Maithripala Sirisena assuming Presidency in Sri Lanka after defeating his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapaksa in a closely contested election on January 8 this year. In both cases, the electorate catapulted into power men who promised change in all earnestness. In their election campaigns, both leaders pledged to sound the death knell of corruption, nepotism, non-governance, and concentration of power in the hands of a few in their countries. The electrically charged environment in both nations also resonated with assertions of good neighbourly goals. Although only time will tell the true extent of any real change, with the leadership change, a new hope dawns for improvements in India-Sri Lanka relations.

Prime Minister Modi's unprecedented SAARC Summit on the day he was sworn in constituted the first shot in that direction. Then, putting his best foot forward to restore a traditional flavour to relations with India, President Maithripala Sirisena announced, soon after assuming Presidency, that India would be the first country to be visited by him, a promise that he fulfilled in mid-February 2015. His visit was preceded by that of Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera to New Delhi in January, which prepared the ground for the Presidential visit. President Sirisena took back with him the promise of Prime Minister Modi visiting Sri Lanka in March.

The visit of President Sirisena created history. Its major highlight was the signing of a nuclear energy cooperation agreement between India and Sri Lanka. It provided for the transfer and exchange of knowledge and expertise, the sharing resources, capacity building, and the training of personnel in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. It also provided for cooperation in the field of nuclear safety and security, radiation safety and radioactive management, nuclear and radiological disaster mitigation, and environmental protection. It also put paid to concerns often voiced during the Rajapaksa presidency about threats to Sri Lanka's security from the Kudankulam nuclear reactor in Tamil Nadu.

India is already involved in building the Sampur Power Project in the Eastern Province in Sri Lanka. The civil nuclear cooperation deal may open

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the door for India to supply a nuclear reactor to Sri Lanka after becoming a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, a move that President Obama promised to facilitate during his visit to New Delhi in January. Currently self-sufficient in the field of energy, Sri Lanka might then become a supplier of energy to India – much like Bhutan – through Indian investment.

India's Prime Minister also took the opportunity of discussing with President Sirisena some vital issues related to cooperation in the defence and strategic fields. It appears likely that Prime Minister Modi's return visit to Sri Lanka in March – almost three decades after that of Rajiv Gandhi's – combined with visits to Mauritius and Seychelles, would lay the ground for the expansion of the Maritime Security Agreement between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives into a full-fledged security arrangement among the five Indian Ocean Rim countries.

Following the visit of President Sirisena to India, we may also see progress towards solving the problems consistently faced by the fishing communities of the two sides. In this regard, the recent invitation extended by the Tamil Nadu government for talks on the subject involving all the interested parties is very encouraging. During the visit, the two nations also signed a Memorandum of Understanding to enable Sri Lanka to participate in the Nalanda University Project. The ground was also created for discussion on the services sector in the forthcoming Commerce Secretary level talks, a sector not covered in the bilateral Free Trade Agreement. The Prime Minister also flagged the issue of the return of 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees still in India which awaits solution.

These developments surely inject fresh warmth in relations between the two neighbours, linked as they are by close bonds of history and geography. The appointment of Ranil Wikremesinge as Sri Lanka's new Prime Minister also forebodes well for greater political and economic proximity between the two nations. He is well-known for his friendly attitude towards India and, during his earlier tenure as Prime Minister from 2001 to 2004, he had even suggested constructing a bridge connecting the Sri Lankan mainland to the sub-continental landmass in the interest of faster travel and transport. However, the matrix of Sri Lanka's foreign policy is not yet set. Moreover, the pulls and pressures of coalition politics are still to unfold in Sri Lanka. Therefore, while hope runs high for closer relations with India, a need for caution remains.

For all their closeness, Indo-Sri Lanka relations have occasionally passed through testing times. The discriminatory treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka

has constituted a serious bone of contention between them ever since their independence. The disenfranchisement of the plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka's Central Highlands commanded the attention of India's first four Prime Ministers – Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi – until a new Citizenship Act in the 1980s laid the controversy to rest. Further, the 'Sinhala Only' policy, and the pogroms carried out in the Tamil North and East of Sri Lanka gave rise to the hydra of the LTTE. It cost the lives of a Sri Lankan President and a former Indian Prime Minister, not to mention other political leaders and countless citizens of Sri Lanka, Tamil and non-Tamil alike. President Rajapaksa's all out war against LTTE removed a major thorn in Sri Lanka's flesh in 2009. However, the war left a long trail of devastation, especially in the North. To alleviate their suffering, India helped Sri Lanka with rehabilitation and restoration projects in the worst affected areas worth more than a billion dollars, extending prompt medical aid, building roads, restoring railway lines, and constructing thousands of homes. However, soon fresh tensions emerged between the two nations.

Hopes ran high that President Rajapaksa would reduce the gulf between Sri Lanka's two major communities, help reconcile them, implement his policy of the 13th Amendment plus devolve power to the provinces, investigate war crimes sincerely, bring the culprits to book, restore human rights, and effectively reduce the military presence in the Tamil majority areas. He started off well, with the establishment of the Tamil National Alliance's rule in the North and the appointment of Ganeshan Wignaraja, a former Justice of the Supreme Court, as its Chief Minister. However, progress towards those vital goals remained limited, seriously alienating the TNA, President Rajapaksa's ally, which had publicly hailed the demise of LTTE and relinquished the separatist tag. Subsequently, before the recent election, TNA changed course, pledged full support to Sirisena's candidacy, and tilted the outcome in his favour. His narrow victory over Rajapaksa (by a little over 2 per cent of the vote) owed itself much to the minorities voting for him. His slipping again on granting provinces the powers due to them under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, including control over police and finances, might unsettle the new President's apple cart as well. During the visit of President Sirisena, India did not make any song and dance about this issue; but Tamil Nadu would not let it be relegated to the past.

TNA also expects the new government to curtail the presence and role of the Sri Lankan army in the North and East as promised by Sirisena before his election. As the Northern Provincial Council's resolution on 'genocide' indicates, there is a mounting call in the North, supported to the hilt by the

Tamil Diaspora, for war crimes to be investigated internationally, accountability issues settled, and the guilty punished. However, both in their pronouncements in Sri Lanka and during their visit to India, the President and the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka have made it very clear that Sri Lanka's armed forces would not be withdrawn from the war zones, and the mechanism set up for the investigation of war crimes and related issues would be domestic, and not international. UNHRC has postponed discussion on the matter till September to see how effectively the new Sri Lankan Government proceeds in the matter, while India keeps its finger crossed, hoping that the issue would be resolved satisfactorily nationally.

Like Rajapaksa and other Executive Presidents before him, Sirisena is a chip of the Sinhala block. Before joining with the UNP on the eve of the last presidential election, he was minister in Rajapaksa's cabinet. As a member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – which designed and executed the 'Sinhala Only' policy and staunchly supported Sinhala dominance in the body politic of Sri Lanka – he bears responsibility in the matter. His birthplace, Polonnaruwa, is an ancient citadel of Buddhism and the Sinhala culture. However, as a grassroots person from an agricultural family and educated at the Maxim Gorky Institute of Literature in Russia, he might be more sensitive to the tragedy and the travails of the minorities, and more sympathetic to them than his predecessors in his current incarnation as an ally of the United National Party and the TNA.

Notably, Wigneswaran, Chief Minister of the Northern Province, has vowed not to participate in Sri Lanka's 4th of February National Day Celebrations until the Tamil concerns are fully addressed. The Tamil community will likely become increasingly restive if pledges made to the TNA are observed only in breach. That would also be a recipe for adverse reactions in Tamil Nadu and a cause for anti-Sri Lankan pressures to build on the Government of India. We know how the lack of progress on LLRC's recommendations during Rajapaksa's rule had obliged India to vote in favour of the Resolution of the UN Human Rights Council in March last year, with adverse consequences for Sri Lanka-India relations.

The Resolution had pressed for an international probe into accountability issues in the absence of a credible national investigation. Contrary to India's move, China sustained its position of support for a domestic investigation of war crimes and human rights violations by Sri Lanka's armed forces during their war with the LTTE, and had voted against the UNHRC Resolution. Chinese military support during the war against LTTE without even quoting costs had already tilted Rajapaksa's policy towards China vis-à-vis India.

China's vote at the UNHRC opened the doors for widening its footprint further in Sri Lanka, which naturally raised India's hackles. India found it strange that, right in the midst of exemplary cooperation between India and Sri Lanka on the rehabilitation and restoration work in its war-ravaged parts, Rajapaksa should have allowed China to replace India as its biggest external financier. It also confirmed India's worst fears about Chinese designs to besiege India by a substantive strategic presence in its neighbourhood all around.

Emblematic of the Chinese approach was the visit of China's new President, Xi Jinping, to Sri Lanka, in close proximity to his visit to India last year. Having built the Hambantota port in one of the most strategic locations in Sri Lanka – it provides a staging post towards the Indian Ocean – China also wishes to use Sri Lanka as a venue for India's oversight along its western coast and beyond. China has carried out joint naval exercises with the Sri Lankan Navy in India's close proximity, is modernising its military and air force strike capabilities, has received berthing facilities for its submarines in Sri Lankan waters twice last year, and has spent a 100 million dollars in military supplies to Sri Lanka. Moreover, China's US\$ 1.25 billion stake in Sri Lanka's Port City Project, with outright property ownership rights, has opened a completely new chapter in Sino-Sri Lankan relations, with adverse strategic implications for India.

Those developments marked a serious shift from Rajapaksa's own description of India as a relative and China only as a friend when comparing Sri Lanka's relations with the two countries. During his nine-year rule, Rajapaksa also paid little heed to India's concerns about the use of its Embassy in Colombo by Pakistan, 'an all-weather friend' of China, to organise terrorism in India. The new regime in Colombo has pledged to correct Rajapaksa's 'over-tilt' towards China. However, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, who had staunchly criticised the Chinese involvement in the Colombo City Port Project, has apparently been persuaded to go soft in the matter in the interest of good relations with China.

Ambassador Wu's congratulatory meetings with President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremasinghe were expectedly cordial, and gave no indication of any balancing of relations between India and China. However, the bonhomie that marked the visit of the new Sri Lankan President to India has generated much hope in India that Sri Lanka will move fast to restore primacy to its relations with India. The signing of the civilian nuclear deal with Sri Lanka on 13 February 2015 during the visit of President Sirisena is very reassuring in this regard. However, putting Sri Lanka-India relations on the fast track depends to a considerable extent upon the success of the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe

team at home. The most important campaign promise of President Sirisena was Sri Lanka's moving away from the Executive Presidency introduced by President Jayewardene 35 years ago and returning to Parliamentary supremacy. To have made that promise in the heat of elections is one thing; to translate it after coming into the saddle is quite another. Restoring the supremacy of the Parliament and the independence of the Judiciary entails shedding much of the constitutional power an Executive President currently wields. This is a tall order. The election of the new Parliament would be a closely contested event, and its outcome cannot be predicted neither can how it will function, once it gets going.

Moreover, the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka remains wide. Sirisena's stunning triumph – made possible by substantial support from all communities – offers hope of an era of better understanding emerging amongst them, for a healing of past wounds, and a movement towards greater integration through greater reconciliation. It becomes essential that the new coalition of fifty-odd groups and parties, including UNP and TNA, acts in harmony and mutual trust in Sri Lanka. The substitution of the military governor of the Northern Province by a civilian represents a step in the right direction. The appointment of Justice Sripavan as the Chief Justice of Sri Lanka is another. He is the first Tamil Chief Justice of the country, and the significance of this historic step cannot be lost on the Tamil community. Another significant step is the President's resolve to substitute military governors by civilians.

While heartily welcoming the changing political scenario in Sri Lanka, and warmly grasping the hand of friendship extended by it, India should keep an eye on what happens on its territory in the next few months, and move a little nimble-footedly, keeping its ears close to the ground. The new regime in Sri Lanka has many promises to keep, many of them in its first hundred days! One hopes, and fondly, that it will cross the hurdles on the way, and be the harbinger of a new dawn, both in Sri Lanka and in its relations with India.

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Sri Lanka and the India-China Conundrum

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The rather unexpected change of guard in Sri Lanka in early January 2015 – when the ostensibly invincible Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated in the Presidential election – seems to have made China rethink its strategy for the ambitious Maritime Silk Road (MSR), no doubt envisaged as a means of extending its influence over the Indian Ocean littoral states. Speaking to the media (27 February 2105) in Beijing in the presence of the visiting Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera – the first Sri Lankan official to visit Beijing since President Mahinda Rajapaksa's defeat in polls in January – the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said: 'China is open to a triangular cooperative relationship' involving India and Sri Lanka; 'I want to say both India and Sri Lanka are China's cooperative partners in South Asia.' Samaraweera and Wang had a lengthy talk focused on the new political alignment in Sri Lanka following the fall of the Rajapaksa government. Samaraweera, however, did not comment on the trilateral proposal by China. Samaraweera's visit to China will be followed by the visit of the new Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's in March 2015. This will be after the visits of both Sri Lankan President Sirisena and Foreign minister Samaraweera to New Delhi.

President Sirisena's major task will be to re-calibrate Sri Lanka's relations with India in the wake of a decade long period of China-friendly policies pursued by his predecessor, President Rajapaksa. While India's strategic interests in Sri Lanka are vital, it also has old cultural and religious ties with the Sri Lankan society going back centuries. A relatively new entrant to the island, China has made large, strategic and commercial investments in Sri Lanka over the last decade, thanks to the Rajapaksas who tried to play China against India. That Sirisena, backed by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, is not exactly well-disposed towards Beijing, is well known. However, China cannot easily be shrugged off. Consider this: between 2005 and 2012, China provided US\$ 4.761 billion as assistance to Sri Lanka. Of this, only two per cent is an outright grant while the remaining 98 per cent is in the form of soft loans. By contrast, a third of India's US\$ 1.6 billion dollars assistance programme to the island comprises outright grants.

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There's more. In the last two years (2012–14), China has committed in excess of US\$ 2.18 billion to Sri Lanka – again, mostly in the form of long-term loans. Most of these funds are destined for priority sectors like roads, expressways, ports, airports, power, irrigation, water supply and railways.

Rajapaksa's supporters contend that all these projects are commercial ventures, and Sri Lanka has no option but to depend on Chinese loans, given that the West has largely kept away citing alleged human rights violations during the final phases of Eelam War IV. Gotabaya Rajapaksa – former Defence Secretary and considered one of the previous regime's most powerful minister – said:

India's friendship and support is very important to Sri Lanka. It is a matter of regret that India appears to have thought otherwise. There have been tensions between India and China for many decades, but Sri Lanka has traditionally had close relations with both nations. Sri Lanka's relationship with China has always been of an economic nature. The docking of Chinese submarines in the Colombo harbour was only for re-supplying and not for any military purpose.

This argument is only partially true. The Chinese have cleverly played on Colombo's fears of isolation and granted concessional loans. Critics of the Rajapaksa regime fear that the Sri Lankan government will be unable to repay such large loans in time, giving the Chinese an opportunity to turn part of the loan into equity, thus making them part owners of vital projects and installations.

The interesting part is that the supply-operate-transfer agreement signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping's September 2014 visit includes a 35-year lease of four out of seven container berths to a Chinese company. It is pertinent to note that the Hambantota project is just a few nautical miles from one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, with more than 4,000 oil tankers passing by each year.

Although the Indian establishment will long regret not taking up Rajapaksa's offer to develop Hambantota, New Delhi is surely worried about the Colombo Port City Project, a massive US\$1.4 billion plan to reclaim 233 hectares of land from the sea along a prominent promenade in Colombo. Of the 233 hectares, the Chinese are being given 88 hectares on a 99-year lease. Interestingly, another 20 hectares will be given to China on a freehold basis. In other words, China or the Chinese company will be a part owner of the project.

In the Sri Lankan capital, the South Container Terminal at Colombo Port is operated by a China-led consortium, which has a 35-year right of ownership under a build-operate-transfer agreement. The Chinese submarine that berthed

in Colombo chose to use this terminal, and not the main port; so did a Chinese naval ship earlier. The Sri Lankan government has tried to reassure New Delhi on this count by pointing out that all dealings with the Chinese are on a commercial basis, and have no geo-strategic importance – a claim believed by no one in India. Why should India worry about increasing Chinese presence in the Colombo port? New Delhi has legitimate concerns since at least 70 per cent of transshipment business at the Colombo port is India-related.

Despite pre-election noises and pressure from New Delhi, the new government in Colombo has shown a singular lack of finesse in dealing with this contentious issue. During the election campaign, Rajapaksa's opponents kept saying they will cancel the Colombo port project only to Rajapaksa having second thoughts on scrapping it after coming to power, thus giving an impression that, in view of the deep inroads Beijing has made in the island nation, he may not get too far in side lining China from Sri Lankan affairs.

Similarly, a change of regime will not automatically witness India's return to a more active role in Colombo. India will have to be proactive in many ways. The Sri Lankan military, which, in its current size, seems disproportionate to the country's requirements, will, perhaps, need to be reduced. Following the decimation of the LTTE, the threat to internal security has reduced. Gradual demobilisation, carefully planned and executed, will release major chunk of funds to meet developmental requirements. One area of possible re-deployment of existing military is on UN Peace-Keeping duties on a rotational basis, as was done till a few years ago. India, with its rich experience of undertaking UN Peace Keeping duties, can lend Sri Lanka a helping hand.

Domestically too, Sirisena's hands are full. Rajapaksa, who won a famous if controversial military victory over the dreaded Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, continued to deny the minority Tamils a fair deal in granting them the much-promised devolution of power after the war ended. A genuine reconciliation between the majority Sinhala and the Tamils, who mainly inhabit the Northern Province, remained elusive under his regime. Therefore, Sirisena's biggest challenge will be to gain confidence of the Tamils who have voted in huge numbers for him – if only to defeat Rajapaksa. That may not be easy though, since Sirisena heads a hastily put together anti-Rajapaksa coalition that comprises of chauvinist Sinhala far right parties opposed to any preferential treatment to minorities.

The Muslims too contributed significantly to Sirisena's victory, resentful as they were of Rajapaksa turning a blind eye to anti-Muslim riots unleashed by extremist Buddhist outfits in 2013. Two major Muslim parties – the Sri

Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) led by Justice Minister Rauff Hakeem, and the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) led by Minister Rishad Bathiuddeen – defected to Rajapaksa’s opponents, thus tilting the scales in Sirisena’s favour decisively.

Sirisena has begun well. The appointment of both the new Chief Justice and the Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka – both eminent Tamil persons – are in the right direction; so also is the appointment of a civilian Governor for the Northern Province and a new Chief Secretary for the same province. By such pro-active appointments, the government has sent out positive signals. Moreover, during his Independence Day address, two prominent leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – R. Sampanthan and deputy secretary M. A. Sumanthiran – attended the celebrations for the first time in over 40 years! According to a report in a Colombo newspaper, the last time the Tamil leadership attended the ceremony was in 1972, prior to the passage of the first Republican Constitution which replaced the Constitution bequeathed to Sri Lanka by departing British colonial rulers. The 1972 Constitution was passed without accepting any of the proposals made by the mainstream Tamil parties which saw the worsening of the political alienation of the Tamils from the Sri Lankan polity.

More significantly, the new government has also made other symbolic gesture towards reconciliation. At the Independence Day celebrations, a statement on peace and reconciliation was read out in all three languages. The statement responded perhaps to the recommendation of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) which recommended that a separate event be set apart on the National Day to express solidarity and empathy with all victims of the tragic conflict. The Declaration of Peace stated, among other things, that

As we commemorate the 67th Independence Day of our nation today, we pay our respects to all the citizens of this country, of all ethnicities and religions, who lost their lives due to the tragic conflict that affected this land for over three decades, and for all the victims of violence since Independence.

A columnist in Sri Lanka surmised: ‘The breadth of this statement included the rebels who died as well, not only in the LTTE led separatist conflict but in the JVP insurrections as well.’

However, the road ahead is tough. On 10 February 2015, the Northern Provincial Council passed a strongly worded resolution accusing successive governments in the island nation of committing ‘genocide’ against the Tamils.

The resolution was moved by Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran, and sought to give ‘an overview of the evidence demonstrating successive Sri Lankan governments’ genocide against Tamils’. He appealed to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights to probe the claim and recommend appropriate prosecution. The resolution does not seem to have gone down well with the leadership in Colombo, given that it has been engaging extensively with different countries, hoping to mobilise international support ahead of the U.N. Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva. Terming the resolution as taking an ‘extremist position’, Health Minister and Cabinet spokesman Rajitha Senarathne said President Maithripala Sirisena had promised to initiate an internationally approved, domestic inquiry process. ‘This is a period of reconciliation, and both sides should engage constructively, rejecting extremism,’ he told *The Hindu*.

There are other challenges as well. Sirisena may have won the presidency, but his real test lies in gaining Parliamentary majority in the elections due post-April 2015. Having broken away from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to contest the Presidential polls against Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sirisena has claimed that he remains a member of the party, and was its General Secretary even after he won the presidential election. The dilemma is: Does Sirisena lead the SLFP against Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe? Rajapaksa is said to be preparing to lead the SLFP as a prime ministerial candidate. Quite obviously, Sirisena and Rajapaksa cannot be on the same side, having accused each other of many things (to say the least) a few moons ago. Then, there is Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga who is bitterly opposed to Rajapaksa. What does Sirisena do in these circumstances? Does this mean that he should be neutral and carry on with his plans to reform the constitution and clean up politics in the country? Or, should he help the UNP, and its leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, who were mainly responsible for his election as president? Supporting the SLFP, of which he is now Chairman, will go against the coalition that was stitched together to oust Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Sirisena will also have to repair ties with Western nations which had ostracised Colombo over allegations of human rights violations. India must also stand with Colombo in its standoff with the West that seeks to punish the country for alleged human rights violations. New Delhi must push for a just probe not coloured by the prejudices of the West, or driven by calls for retribution against the Rajapaksa brothers. In his defeat, Rajapaksa’s contribution in ending one of the world’s most brutal insurgencies waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) must not be forgotten, or underestimated.

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Leadership Change in Sri Lanka: Implications for India

R. Hariharan*

The defeat of Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the hands of the last minute challenger Maithripala Sirisena, Rajapaksa's former senior minister belonging to his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has churned up Sri Lankan politics as never before.

Rajapaksa lost by a 3 per cent margin against the common opposition candidate Sirisena's tally of 51 per cent of votes cast. Rajapaksa's defeat was mainly due to the massive minority votes against him and in favour of Sirisena. However, four fifths of the 48 per cent votes he polled are estimated to have come from Sinhala votes. This indicates that the Tamil and Muslim minorities can be game changers in national politics. Mainstream national parties like the SLFP and the UNP will keep this in mind not only during electioneering but also in policy making. On the other hand, their desire to appease the minorities in order to win their support has to be balanced against the possible Sinhala backlash against such moves.

In addition to the majority Sinhala support, Rajapaksa also enjoys the support of SLFP rank and file. This was demonstrated when thousands of people attended a rally in his support at Nugegoda on February 19. This shows that he might be bruised but not mortally wounded in the political battle. The possibility of Rajapaksa staging a comeback will continue to haunt the Sirisena-Wikremasinghe (former president) Chandrika Kumaratunga combine which defeated him. The fear of a comeback could induce them to contest the April parliamentary election under their national unity front. On the flip side, though the SLFP elected Sirisena as their chairman after Rajapaksa resigned, SLFP might want to go it alone in the election, thwarting Sirisena's unity strategy. This uncertainty has the potential to break up the national unity front now in power.

Rajapaksa's defeat is a reminder that personal popularity among the people cannot be taken for granted to win elections. Two important reasons for the vote against Rajapaksa are: accumulating power within the family, and excluding ruling party and coalition leaders from the decision making process that curtailed their powers. The result also showed that the voter would not

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tolerate the arrogant conduct of 'dynasty' members who showed a lack of sensitivity to public grievances while exercising the powers of the government. This enabled the opposition to attract Sirisena to cross over, and stand as a common opposition candidate. The opposition was also able to sell the idea of a national unity government to make good its promise of improving governance on a time bound agenda, and making the President more accountable to parliament and empowering the Prime Minister system.

The Sirisena government has started implementing the 100-Day Action Plan (DAC) to improve accountability and systems of governance, and to suitably amend the constitution to introduce structural changes. In this process, it has come under tremendous pressure from internal and external constituencies and vested interests as it is trying to investigate sleaze and corruption cases committed by the Rajapaksa family, and those close to them. However, to successfully implement the DAC, the national unity government needs the SLFP's continued support. Though Sirisena leads the SLFP, which is the main opposition in parliament, there is a strong pro Rajapaksa faction within the party. Some of the smaller partners of the UPFA coalition – like the National Freedom Front (NFF) - have retained their loyalty to Rajapaksa. Thus, Sirisena has to act carefully to further the government agenda lest the Rajapaksa faction pulls the rug under him on contentious issues. Such issues would include devolution of powers to Tamils, the full implementation of the 13th Amendment (13A) to the Constitution which curbs the Buddhist fringe's anti-Muslim campaign, and showing undue favours to India. While the government has toned down Rajapaksa's bogies of xenophobia and LTTE revival, it has been cautious in handling other issues to keep the pro-Rajapaksa opposition at bay.

President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wikremasinghe have taken a number of initiatives to review and investigate all mega projects and deals entered into by the Rajapaksa regime for suspected corruption, and to identify the culprits as promised in the run up to the election. Many China-aided mega projects are also being investigated for alleged cases of corruption involving Rajapaksa family members and their cronies. The Sirisena regime's desire to bring the culprits to book could create unpleasantness for China, encouraging it to use loans and economic aid as a pressure point. This could cause embarrassment to the government which already has a huge problem of servicing China's loans and debts. Thus, after some contradictory stands by some of the cabinet members, the Prime Minister has made it clear that Sri Lanka would strive to maintain good relations with China, and has the potential of helping Sri Lanka develop its economy further.

From the above analysis it would appear that the new government's strength lies in producing visible results, and retaining the broad based support of both the majority as well as the minorities. Conscious of this, the government has launched short term actions to show visible results that make a difference to the ordinary citizen before the parliamentary election due on 23 April 2015. This will help the government garner support from the constituency that voted it to power; it would also help it carry out the promised constitutional and systemic changes.

The new government went into action from day one. Some of the actions taken so far include the lifting of press censorship and restrictions on permitting foreigners to visit the Northern Province. These actions have been given wider publicity than that given to the alleged acts of corruption and nepotism by the Rajapaksa regime, and the progress of their investigations. There is no overt witch hunting of Rajapaksa family, though a number of instances of misuse of official privileges and big time corruption have been reported. As many as 20 Rajapaksa appointees in diplomatic posts have been replaced. Similarly, as a part of the cleaning up of the public institutions, the controversial Chief Justice has been replaced.

President Sirisena has adopted a simple lifestyle: for instance, for his state visit to India, he travelled by a commercial flight rather than using a special aircraft. He cancelled Rajapaksa's extravagant projects – like the US\$ 16 billion order for the purchase of a passenger aircraft for the exclusive use of the President and the Prime Minister. The government has also closed another multi-million-dollar contract entered by Rajapaksa regime for lobbying in the USA.

Though the Tamil minority's demand for the resumption of the political process has not been dealt with yet, some of their other long standing demands ignored by Rajapaksa have been met. These include the replacement of the Northern Province Governor (a retired Army General) with a 'non-military civil servant.' Similarly, the Chief Secretary - who was a major irritant for the provincial government - was also replaced. In a show of equal opportunity being maintained as a criterion for appointments, two Tamils have been posted as Governors, and the new Chief Justice of the country is also a Tamil.

On the international front, President Sirisena has successfully negotiated with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for six more months to come out with a domestic investigation mechanism in consultation with the UN. The UNHRC has deferred the release of the UN investigation report into war crimes allegations and human rights violations during the Eelam war. These measures have generally been welcomed by the international community, notably the USA and India.

Implications for India

The leadership change in Sri Lanka is a welcome development for India-Sri Lanka relations which had turned a little sour during President Rajapaksa's second term in office due to two major irritants. First, Rajapaksa failed to keep up his promise to implement the 13th Amendment in full to trigger the reconciliation process with Tamils. The UPA government, in fact, lost their political credibility in Tamil Nadu due to Rajapaksa's continued indifference.

The other jarring note was Rajapaksa's marked preference for China to the detriment of India not only in trade and commerce and the strategic sphere but also of India-aided projects. Indian imports were slapped with high tariffs, and the Sri Lankan bureaucracy dragged its feet in clearing Indian-aided projects - a good example of which is the Muthur power plant. Even Indian rehabilitation projects for Tamils suffered from this studied neglect.

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, he quickly demonstrated his priority for improving India's relations with its South Asian neighbours that have suffered benign neglect under the earlier dispensation. Though President Rajapaksa met the Indian Prime Minister twice since he came to office in May 2014, he belied Modi's hopes of getting a positive response from him.

In his congratulatory message to President-elect Sirisena, Prime Minister Modi said: 'Your historic victory is a tribute to your vision for Sri Lanka [and] your capacity to connect with people's yearning for change'; he also touched upon the similarity in their perspectives that helped them come to power. However, it was President Pranab Mukherjee who clearly spelled out India's expectations from the new President. In his message of congratulations, he said: 'I wish you all the success in building a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, on foundations of genuine and effective reconciliation'.

In a positive gesture, President Sirisena made his visit to New Delhi his first foreign destination. Sirisena needs India's support and influence in UN forums to help Sri Lanka get out of the standoff with the UNHRC as well as to strengthen its negotiating position with China on revising the terms of China-aided projects, and in investigating corruption allegations in them. India can also be useful in helping to swing TNA support in his favour in the forthcoming general elections. During his four day visit, he was warmly received in New Delhi. In his talks with the visiting President, Prime Minister Modi aptly described the two countries as standing at the threshold of an 'unprecedented opportunity' to take the bilateral relationship to the next level.

On the occasion of this visit, four pacts were signed between the two countries. Apart from the agreement on civil nuclear cooperation and an agreement on Cultural Cooperation for 2015-18 - aimed to enhance the level and scope of cooperation in a number of fields and institutions, two memoranda of understanding (MoU) were also signed. One of them related to the establishment of the Nalanda University and would enable Sri Lanka to participate in the Nalanda University Project. The other one dealt with the Work Plan 2014-15 for agricultural cooperation, and is aimed at facilitating bilateral cooperation in agro-related fields.

Except for the agreement on the peaceful use of civil nuclear energy, other mainstream issues - like security, maritime security or economic development - are conspicuous by their absence in the pacts. This seems to indicate that the Modi government is more keen to expand upon existing areas of cooperation and make them more vibrant rather than adding more pacts on paper. Among the perennial problem areas, the issue of Tamil Nadu fishermen poaching in Sri Lankan waters, did find a reference in the talks; however, the vexing emotional and political issues of Tamils - including the full implementation of the 13th Amendment and resuming the reconciliation process with Tamils, as also the war crimes allegations - did not figure in any official statements.

Even in Sirisena's meeting with President Pranab Mukherjee, these two issues were apparently not touched upon. From the press release, the two seemed to have dwelt upon enlarging the scope of trade and commerce under the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for mutual benefit. The Sri Lanka Health Minister and Cabinet Spokesman Rajitha Senaratne, who accompanied the President on his return to Colombo, clarified that the Indian hosts did not insist on the implementation of the 13A Amendment regarding the devolution of power.

Apparently, India did not raise the two sensitive issues relating to Tamil minority lest it affects President Sirisena's support base among Sinhala majority who have been supporting Rajapaksa's strong stand on these issues. Evidently, President Sirisena has impressed New Delhi with his sincerity in attending to Tamil demands other than the full implementation of 13A. On day one in office, he replaced the retired General who was the Governor of the Northern Province with a retired civil servant with better credentials. Similarly, the Chief Secretary of the province, considered a Trojan horse of Rajapaksa by the TNA, was also replaced. Two Tamils have been appointed as Governors while the new Chief Justice is also a Tamil. Probably, India wants to encourage Sirisena's efforts to rewrite the Sinhala narrative on the Tamil issue with an

inclusive idiom even within his political constraints.

A positive aspect of the new leadership in Sri Lanka is their readiness to correct the ‘over-tilt’ towards China, and achieve a balanced relationship with India. They had made their intentions clear even during the run up to the election. Sri Lanka’s Minister of External Affairs, Mangala Samaraweera, had repeated his determination to do this when he visited New Delhi a week after joining the cabinet. The bonhomie seen in New Delhi during President Sirisena’s visit vouches for the tremendous good will he enjoys in India.

Sri Lanka’s overtures to the USA to mend bilateral relations have the potential to make China suspicious. A better relationship with the USA is important for Sri Lanka not only to improve trade and investment but also to help it balance its strategic relations with China, and to get out of the impasse at the UNHRC.

At the strategic security level, apart from Sri Lanka’s bid to renew relations with India, China’s concerns with the Sirisena government relate to its ambitious power projection in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Sri Lanka has emerged as a key strategic pivot astride the Indian Ocean to further China’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Route (MSR). Sri Lanka has already announced its support to the initiative. China has recently announced an outlay of US\$ 40 billion for the MSR. With this huge investment, and those already made in port and road infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, China simply cannot afford any obstruction to the completion of MSR, which would increase its strategic reach in keeping with its global ambitions.

China has tried to use its existing discounted but firm relationship with Sri Lanka by turning President Sirisena’s desire to rebalance Sri Lanka’s relations with India as an opportunity for evolving a triangular relationship with India and Sri Lanka. This would help China further its strategic objectives in IOR and South Asia, as well as bring in India to join the MSR and turn it into a successful project.

Probably a clearer picture would emerge after the series of visits planned in the near future by the leaders of India and Sri Lanka. These include President Sirisena’s visit to Beijing in March 2015; Prime Minister Modi’s maiden visit to Colombo in the same month; followed by his visit to China in May 2015. By then, the post-election situation in Sri Lanka would also be clearer. The arrival of Sirisena gives hope for better relations with India; but much would depend upon how both nations build upon it.

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India-Sri Lanka Relations in the New Era: Old Challenges, New Vistas

J. Jeganaathan*

The year 2014 has been decisive not only in Indian politics wherein the BJP came to power with a full mandate but also in Sri Lankan politics which witnessed tectonic changes. However, whether there will be any substantial changes in the India-Sri Lanka relationship with the new leadership remains to be seen. Many questions arise: Will the new Sri Lankan government be also tempted to play the China card against India? What can India do to counter such a strategy? Why has India's Sri Lanka policy been counterproductive so far? Is Tamil Nadu still a critical factor in shaping India-Sri Lanka relations? Is Sri Lanka scrambling for geopolitical competition between India, China and Pakistan? The answers to these questions remain elusive to most Indian policy makers.

It was highly expected that the Modi government would give top most priority to its foreign policy towards its nuclear armed neighbours as was proposed in the BJP's election manifesto. These included policy alternatives on the nuclear doctrine, a strong approach towards Pakistan, and an assertive policy stance vis-à-vis China. However, quite astonishingly, the priority order of the Modi government's foreign policy initiatives seems to have been reversed, with more focus on friendly countries first – perhaps to consolidate India's influence which is being eroded by large-scale development oriented projects aided by the Chinese. This explains why Bhutan and Maldives were given priority instead of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka occupies a central focus in this scheme of things because of its geostrategic position, which lies at the heart of India's maritime strategic interests.

When the newly elected Prime Minister designate invited all the Heads of State of South Asian countries for his swearing-in ceremony, many wondered whether the new government was set to revisit the old notions of South Asia being Indo-centric, and India's geostrategic interests being supreme and sacrosanct. However, it would be erroneous to judge, or be too early to extract substantial meaning out of the nature and characteristics of the Modi government's foreign policy strategies. It is obvious that New Delhi is stern in dealing with the so-called outstanding issues with the neighbours at the bilateral level. This is evident from the fact that Prime Minister Modi did not

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raise any bilateral issues at the last SAARC summit (as is the norm at such summits). Rather, he stressed on working together towards a common dream of development and good governance through cooperative endeavours.

The previous UPA government, with a fragile mandate, failed to dissuade Sri Lanka from forging robust economic and military cooperation with China as well as Pakistan. As a result, India's influence had been reduced to merely the cultural sphere. A cursory look at India's bilateral discourse in the past decade shows how little political leverage India has vis-à-vis its neighbours, and how most of its engagements have been focused towards strengthening cultural contacts instead of forging economic partnerships. The new government is cognisant of these shortcomings and has, therefore, initiated a clear cut policy of constructive engagement and meaningful dialogue with Sri Lanka to promote mutual understanding on common interests. However, Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family had meticulously kept India at bay by playing the China card. Moreover, India's policy stand remains unchanged on most areas of mutual concern, such as fishermen, reconciliation and rehabilitation issues, and the devolution of power to the provinces – all of which will continue to pose problems in developing closer relations.

The perception of Indian interference in local Sri Lankan politics also plays a vital role in exaggerating such misunderstandings. Rajapaksa was seemingly misguided or ill-advised by his coteries that the new government in India, with its stronger mandate, would assert its presence, and even dictate terms and conditions on the evolution of their bilateral relationship. He might have felt that the only way to consolidate his waning power at the domestic level is to call for a snap election, *a la* Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He strongly believed that his charisma would blur the strong anti-incumbent sentiments prevailing in Sri Lankan society, cutting across all ethnicities. This sentiment was also guided by the fact that New Delhi is believed to have sent a strong message to Rajapaksa in mid-September last year, when it allowed a Chinese nuclear submarine to dock at Colombo.

The defeat of Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential elections in Sri Lanka has indeed restored people's faith in democracy by hammering the final nail in the coffin of dynastic politics. For the first time in Sri Lankan political history, the ethnic minorities have offered support which is *not* based on their grievances but on the common agenda of restoring the rule of law and development. Tamils and Muslims in the Northern and Eastern provinces voted en masse against Rajapaksa as he did not deliver on the rehabilitation promises and the transfers of land powers; instead, continued to evade the international community on the question of independent inquiry into war crimes. The strategy

of the opposition parties to field a common presidential candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, surprised Rajapaksa, who later blamed India for engineering this political change. There was even a rumour afloat that Rajapaksa was trying to stage a political coup by using the army and the judiciary. The end of Rajapaksa era has heralded a new era in Sri Lankan politics, and opened a new chapter in its bilateral relationship with India as well as China.

Political Epiphany in the Ethnic Cacophony

Mathiripala Sirisena's electoral victory over Mahinda Rajapaksa cannot be seen in absolute terms. One cannot forget that Sirisena was very much part of the previous government, and its politics. Though he has promised to abolish corruption, limit presidential powers, restore the independence of the judiciary, and remove corruption, it will not be easy to immediately reverse the foreign and security policies pursued by his predecessor, especially with regards to China. According to a Sri Lankan estimate, China has invested US\$ 4 billion in infrastructure projects since 2009, and has lent US\$ 490 million in 2012 alone. Although the new government has promised to reduce its dependence on China, it has given green signal to a US\$ 1.5 billion project to build ports without any delay. Chinese exports to Sri Lanka have also grown at 14 per cent – next only to India's 20 per cent. It is estimated that China will surpass India by 2020 in terms of exports and developmental assistance in building mega projects in Sri Lanka, while India has invested only on small projects such as railways, and building bridges, schools and hospitals.

Besides, the new President has not yet articulated any clear policy on the Tamil question which poses a many fold challenges. The foremost big question is the devolution of powers to the Northern and Eastern provinces as has been demanded by TNA, which includes land and police powers. A vast swathe of land captured from LTTE is still under the control of the army. Rehabilitation and reconciliation pose big challenges to the new government since they are linked to the demilitarisation of the region.

Sirisena also has to rein in both the Sinhalese nationalists and the Buddhist radicals who pose existential threats to ethnic and religious minorities. Religious freedom has been compromised with the rise of such ethno-religious fundamentalism. The most pragmatic approach to address this phenomenon could be to revive the debate on state reforms at the national level for a more inclusive politics. Given his leftist ideological orientation, the new President should think of ways to build a national consensus towards

constitutional reforms. This may be a daunting task; but it is worth initiating as soon as possible.

Another important challenge the new government faces is to tackle international pressure on the government to allow independent international investigation of war crimes. In a recent interview to the media, Sirisena categorically stated that his government would constitute a committee to conduct an independent inquiry into the alleged war crimes. But, he is hesitant to let international investigators or the UN undertake any parallel investigations. This matter needs to be watched in view of the Human Right Review Conference slated to take place shortly. China would obviously vote against any resolution on Sri Lanka. However, the moot question is: Will India vote in favour of the resolution, or against it? This is, again, a challenge for India's foreign policy thinkers.

Lastly, geopolitical underpinnings will also condition the new government's functions. There is strong domestic belief that the Sri Lankan economy can grow at a fast pace if it diversifies its foreign investments into energy and infrastructure projects. It wants to play an active role in the Chinese Maritime Silk Route (MSR) project; but, at the same time, it takes cautious steps to avoid angering India. Moreover, Sirisena's rainbow coalition partners have their own vested interests and expectations from the new government. The key to the future would lie in how the President aligns such interests to be in sync with long-term national interests. It is a rare opportunity for him, since he has been elected with a sizable support across major ethnic minorities who would expect reforms in the disturbed current socio-political environment. There is no doubt that he would also have to manage other polarising political pressures.

Indo-Lanka Relations: Old Challenges, New Vistas

After being elected the President of Sri Lanka, Sirisena chose India for his maiden foreign visit. This underscores how much the new government values the relationship with India and understands its geostrategic sensitivities. New Delhi has also warmly embraced the new leadership in Sri Lanka, and has promised full cooperation on various issues – although this change in Indian behaviour is no doubt guided by its own strategic interests.

One significant divergence in the current developments on the bilateral front is the absence of the Tamil Nadu factor. The Modi government chose to engage all the stakeholders, including the Tamil political parties in Sri Lanka, directly – that is, without any interlocutors. This is indeed a mutual rejection

of sub-national political movements which have hindered the socio-economic development of the region for the past many decades. However, at the same time, New Delhi seems less prone to allowing the Tamil ethnic issue to become the deciding factor in the development of overall relations.

On the issue of war crimes and retributive justice, India's policy has not changed much. It continues to be ambivalent towards demands for an independent international inquiry into the alleged war crimes committed at the end of the war. This remains a difficult issue for India to deal with, as any interference would invite a strong reaction from Sinhala nationalists that could damage India's image in Sri Lanka.

Yet, India's coastal security is a big challenge, particularly after the 26/11 Mumbai carnage. Gulf of Mannar does pose a serious security challenges to India's strategic assets in Tamil Nadu and adjacent areas. This could take the form of any terrorist group entering into Indian waters through the Palk Strait to launch a terrorist attack in Southern India. Over the last few years, Indian intelligence sources are believed to have dismantled many such modules, and thwarted many terrorist activities in the South. Unlike the previous UPA regime, the new government can act freely, without any political pressure from Tamil Nadu, and thus can formulate a strong policy towards Sri Lanka. Long-term objectives must be the goal of any such framework which should reflect the interests of all the stake-holders.

Though the recent visit by President Sirisena is seen as a milestone in India-Sri Lanka relations, no substantial agreement was signed that could protect India's larger interests. There was also no concrete mechanism or agreement on how to resolve the fishermen issue on both sides, except a simple promise by the new President about joint patrolling, and taking a humanitarian approach to the problem. It appears that both countries have decided to put the old issues or challenges on the backburner, and are trying to discover new vistas in their relationship.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Modi government is much more assertive and very articulate of its regional interests as compared to the previous government. It has clearly indicated that India would play a leadership role in South Asia, with less interference but more involvement in the development sectors in its neighbouring countries. It wants to make its footprint stronger in the economic development of neighbouring countries. This is not necessarily only to contain China's aggressive inroads; rather, it is to expand both its shrinking markets

as well as its cultural identity. The 'SAARC Yatra' by the new Foreign Secretary is an innovative strategy adopted by the MEA to strengthen India's role in the neighbourhood.

With its new leaderships, both India and Sri Lanka should take a fresh look at each other; and it is high time they take the bilateral relationship between the two countries to the next phase.

The Silver Lining in India-Sri Lanka Relations

Gulbin Sultana*

With the election of Maithripala Sirisena as President of Sri Lanka, and the formation of the National Unity Government, it is expected that India's southern neighbour will have a more democratic polity as compared to the earlier one. In addition, there is also a general popular expectation that, under the new government, there would be a greater balance in dealing with developmental issues in various constituent provinces of the island nation. There is also a general hope that there will be a thawing in the almost frozen India-Sri Lanka relationship.

The relationship between the two countries soured in the post-LTTE period under President Mahinda Rajapaksa – more particularly during his second term. This was mainly due to Rajapaksa's reluctance to move towards granting greater autonomy and ensuring devolution of power to the Northern Province, as stipulated in the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Secondly, Rajapaksa Government also inelegantly resorted playing the so-called "China Card" against India.

From Colombo's perspective, Rajapaksa was irked by India's insistence on speedy implementation of the 13th Amendment; and was unhappy with India's stand at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) when Sri Lanka was criticised for Human Rights violations during the final phases of the military operations against the LTTE and its refusal to accept international inquiry. Analysts argue that these two developments account for President Rajapaksa adopting an overtly pro-China slant.

Between 2005 and 2012, China provided US\$ 4.8 billion as assistance to Sri Lanka, of which 98 per cent was in the form of loans, and 2 per cent as grants. China was allowed to invest in strategically sensitive areas in Sri Lanka, despite these investments coming at a high rate of interest. Trade between the two countries went up from US\$ 659 million in 2005 to US\$ 3.62 billion in 2013.

In contrast, India-Sri Lanka trade declined since 2012. China in the mean time replaced India as the largest foreign investor in Sri Lanka, while there was no progress in negotiations on concluding the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and Sri Lanka.

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Further, the Rajapaksa government turned down India's offer to construct the Palaly airport and contemplated taking back the 99 oil tanks in Trincomalee that were leased to Lanka IOC, the local subsidiary of the Indian Oil Corporation.

To compound matters further, the Rajapakse government allowed the Chinese to construct an Air Force maintenance base in Trincomalee, provided China permanent ownership of 22 acres of land and 86 acres on lease for 99 years under the Colombo Port City Project, and allowed Chinese submarines to dock in the 'Chinese enclave' within a Sri Lankan-administered harbour in Colombo. All these developments raised serious security concerns in India. No wonder, Rajapakse lost no time in blaming India for having undermined his election and blaming Indian intelligence agencies for his defeat. New Delhi swiftly refuted the allegations, although Rajapaksa's defeat in the Presidential election on 8 January 2015 was euphoric news for India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first to congratulate the victor, Maithripala Sirisena, on his victory. In his congratulatory message to Sirisena, Modi reaffirmed 'India's continued solidarity and support for Sri Lanka's peace, development and prosperity'. He also expressed the hope that 'Indo-Sri Lankan relations would reach to a new level' under the new President.

The political parties in Tamil Nadu too appeared hopeful about the new President Sirisena and his National Unity Government turning a positive leaf in the country's approach towards India. Sirisena, on his part, talked about the implementation of the 13th Amendment and the speedy resolution of the problems of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The new Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, indicated that the China card would not be played against India. The new government then reportedly pledged to review some of the Chinese projects in the country.

The symbolism reflected in these few announcements and steps so far taken point towards improvement in India-Sri Lanka relations under the new government. The new Minister of External Affairs, Mangala Samaraweera, made India his first destination foreign visits within five days of assuming power. President Sirisena also chose to visit India as his first foreign destination as Sri Lanka's new President. In tandem with Sri Lanka's diplomatic steps, Prime Minister Modi announced his prospective visit to Sri Lanka in March, depicting the high priority India places on improving its relations with this important neighbour.

While this essay echoes the view of the optimists in both India and Sri Lanka who hold that Indo-Lanka relations will improve under the new

governments, some reservations still remain. First of all, the full implementation of the 13th Amendment by the Sirisena government may confront opposition of various kinds in Sri Lankan domestic politics. Secondly, it is unlikely that Sri Lanka will cancel all the strategically important Chinese projects in the country or sever its strong ties with China. Yet, with the Sirisena government at the helm, there is a strong possibility that there will be more cooperation and less acrimony in relations between the two countries. One may expect more meaningful engagements between the two countries on all contentious issues.

Reconciliation with Sri Lankan Tamils

The Tamils in Sri Lanka have immediate as well as long term concerns. The immediate issues include facilitating the return of the internally displaced people (IDP) to their original homes, returning the lands within high security zones to their actual owners, the release of Tamil political prisoners, disclosing information about people who have disappeared, the livelihood of the people in the country's North and East, and also the withdrawal of the military from the North and East.

A lot of expectations concerning these issues hinge upon the Sirisena government, as the Rajapaksa government did not take any meaningful initiative to address them. The denial of functional autonomy to the Northern Province has been at the centre of the Rajapaksa government's failure, and the need for reconciliation. The Rajapaksa government did not allow the Northern Provincial Council to function without the interference of the Governor, an ex-military officer, who was appointed during the war by the President. The demand of the Chief Minister of the Northern Provincial Council and the people in the area to appoint a civilian Governor was ignored. These steps taken by the last government in Sri Lanka have left a deep discord between the Tamil dominated Northern Province and Colombo.

The new President has already taken a few positive steps on some of these issues, such as the appointment of a civilian Governor and withdrawal of the ban on transporting goods to the North and the East. The new cabinet has also approved the release of civilian lands in the high security zones and has promised to set up a committee to investigate the case of disappeared people. However, the new President has categorically said that the military will not be withdrawn from the North and the East.

Thus, a section of Tamils in the North are not very hopeful about the

Sirisena government meeting some of their genuine requirements. They are of the view that the government is initiating the positive measures (mentioned above) to delay – or even derail – the release of the UN Commission’s report (which was scheduled to be released in March 2015) on alleged war crimes and the violation of human rights during the last phase of the Eelam war. However, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), particularly the leaders of the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), is more positive about the National Unity government. They have been demanding talks with the government on the issue of political devolution on the basis of the proposals presented in five government appointed committee reports in the past (the Parliament select Committee Report prepared by Mangala Moonesinghe Committee in 1992; the Government of Sri Lanka’s proposals for constitutional reforms in 1995, 1997 and August 2000; and Mahinda Rajapaksa’s speech to All Party Representatives Committee and Committee of Experts on July 11, 2006). Ranil Wickremesinghe had agreed to cooperate with the TNA on this matter during the Rajapaksa period, but no discussion took place between the TNA and President Rajapaksa on this issue. The current government has expressed its interest to initiate talks with the TNA, based on these proposals.

However, it is quite unlikely that President Sirisena would be able to find a satisfactory solution regarding the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. As the present new government is a rainbow coalition of 49 parties, many alliance partners of the new government are against it. In the recent past, some of these parties have even proposed a bill to repeal the amendment. President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe are not keen to provide police power to the provinces, which is a key Tamil demand. Hence, the issue of the implementation of the 13th Amendment remains caught in a cleft stick.

However, the Government of India is not going to push the National Unity government too much on the implementation of the 13th Amendment. As of now, the new government has shown a positive approach towards the immediate issues concerning the Tamils. On the issue of war crimes also, the new government has agreed to work and cooperate with the United Nations – something the previous government had blatantly refused to do. However, by prioritising citizen rights, the new government has refused to allow the trial of any Sri Lankan citizen in the International Court. Simultaneously, the new government has stressed on developing a domestic mechanism to deal with the war crimes. The Sri Lankan Tamils are not happy about the matter, but the Government of India has supported Sirisena government on this issue, as India itself has been calling for the creation of a credible domestic mechanism to deal

with war crimes in Sri Lanka for some time.

As regards the 13th Amendment, India's main concern has been the presence of around one lakh Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka in India. Without achieving political reconciliation in the North and the East in Sri Lanka, the voluntary repatriation of the Tamil refugees in India will not be possible. Fortunately, the new government in Sri Lanka has already initiated talks on the repatriation issue. While the talk on the refugee issue is still going on, India's strategy is likely to be "wait and watch" instead of pushing the Sri Lankan Government on the 13th Amendment. It may be noted that there was no mention of the 13th Amendment in the joint statement released during President Sirisena's visit to India between 15–18 February 2015. This could be a signal that both the governments are working on this issue behind the curtains, thus choosing not to make the process public just yet.

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)

On account of a substantial sway of anti-India sentiment among the Sri Lankan nationalists, Colombo so far has opposed signing of the CEPA. President Rajapaksa put the issue on the back burner, citing a lack of consensus on the issue despite Sri Lankan economists and experts advocating the CEPA on account of the benefits that would accrue to Sri Lanka from this initiative.

The United National Party (UNP) leaders are in favour of signing the CEPA. Responding to the nationalists' fear that the country's service sector would be flooded with Indians, the new Finance Minister, Ravi Karunanayake, has argued that even without a CEPA with China, Sri Lankan engineers are not getting an opportunity to work in the infrastructure projects handled by the Chinese. Since the current government is in favour of the CEPA, and India is going to be less assertive on the implementation of the 13th Amendment, a new momentum may be expected on the issue of CEPA as well as bilateral trade between the two countries. During his talks with Prime Minister Modi, President Sirisena agreed to strengthen economic ties between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi in turn expressed his support for a more balanced growth in trade in both directions. They also agreed to have Commerce Secretary level talks to review their bilateral commercial relations soon.

Increasing Chinese Presence in Sri Lanka

The Rajapaksa government's purpose in allowing China to construct strategic infrastructure at high rates of interest has been questioned by the alliance

partners of the new government. The high interest rate has resulted in a huge debt burden on the country. The cost of living has become very high, and the poor and middle classes are reeling under the rising prices of fuel and food. The new government has explicitly talked about reviewing some of these Chinese projects. The Northern Expressway project has already been suspended. Plans are also afoot to review the Colombo Port City project for its environmental impact. The UNP leaders are also arguing that through these projects, the Chinese were allowed access to the high security zones in the country. However, it might not be possible for the new government to cancel many of these projects due to the latent conditions involved with some of them, albeit there is a hope that the Sirisena government, unlike its predecessor, will not overplay the China card vis-à-vis India. Under the new government, the relations between Sri Lanka and China are expected to be based on grounds of pragmatism.

As such, India is not against Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, especially as long as it does not affect India's security interests. In the past, Ranil Wickremesinghe and Chandrika Kumaratunga had expressed their understanding of India's security concerns. In 2014, Wickremesinghe raised the issue of the construction of the Air Force maintenance base in Trincomalee in Parliament. He questioned the Sri Lankan government's intent to have considered China for constructing it in violation of the 1987 India-Lanka Accord. It is presumed that so long as the Wickremesinghe-Kumaratunga duo continue to have their influence on the government, Sri Lanka will be careful about India's security concerns. Moreover, there is realisation in Sri Lanka that the country cannot survive with Chinese assistance alone, and needs to better its relations with an important neighbour like India. Rajapaksa relied heavily on diplomatic support of China, but none could not stop the passing of the UN resolution against Sri Lanka. The Sirisena government, therefore, is expected to have a more balanced approach towards both India and China.

In India-Sri Lanka relations, it has been observed that Sri Lanka is extremely sensitive about India supporting the Tamil cause. To address this concern, successive governments in Sri Lanka have tried to balance India with an extra-regional power, which in its turn has made India suspicious of Sri Lanka's motives. This has resulted in India playing the Tamil card with Sri Lanka when needed. Realising the possible repercussions of India's Tamil card, Rajapaksa maintained good relations with India during his war against the LTTE. In the post-LTTE period, Rajapaksa underestimated India's ability to play the Tamil card effectively, and relied on his pro-China policy to deal

with the challenges from India and the international community. In retrospect, he had to pay a heavy price at the personal, domestic and international levels.

There is realisation by the current governments in India and Sri Lanka that the policies of the previous governments in both countries did have negative fallouts on the bilateral relations between the two countries. Rajapaksa did not have the political will to improve relations with India, and blamed it on pressure from the anti-India constituencies in his country. The Indian government, on the other hand, wanted to improve its relations with Sri Lanka, but mainly due to coalition politics and specifically because of the pressure from Tamil Nadu, could not go forward in the intended direction. Since the current Indian government is not a coalition government – and more importantly is not dependent on Tamil politicians’ support for its survival – it is expected to have a more pragmatic and positive policy towards Sri Lanka.

The Sirisena government is also likely to have a positive approach towards India, already indicated by the few initiatives that his government has taken. It will try to mend relations with India not necessarily by jettisoning its relations with China. A deft political calculation will be required by the Sirisena government on the issue of the implementation of the 13th Amendment, as it has the potential to cause a significant political loss by an upset Sinhala majority. The best way forward for Sri Lanka would be in following a middle path in its foreign policy, keeping in mind strategic concerns of an important neighbour like India.

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Revisiting the Issue of ‘Highland Tamils’ in the Changing Political Dynamics

Gautam Sen*

On 9 January 2015, after his victory in the recent Sri Lankan presidential elections and becoming his country’s sixth Executive President, Maithripala Sirisena stated (in Kandy) that while protecting Buddhism, the country’s main religion, his government would also protect the rights and freedoms of the Hindu, Muslim and Catholic people, and create consciousness among them and all strata of Sri Lankan society, that they should work to build up their country. Given the pre-election assimilative posture of Sirisena and his rainbow New Democratic Front (NDA) political coalition, a change in certain attributes of the country’s domestic policy may be expected during the duopoly NDA regime, with himself as the President, and Ranil Wikremasinghe (of the United National Party) as Prime Minister. Furthermore, in his first Independence speech on 4 February 2015, President Sirisena has declared the setting up of a special task-force to cater to the needs of building a united and integrated nation.

In this context, there is an apparent need for a new appraisal of the status, both economic and political, of the Hill Country or Highland Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. This community is nearly 1.48 million in number, and constituted approximately 11.61 per cent of the total Sri Lankan population as per the official Census data of 1971. They continue to form an important part of Sri Lankan citizenry even though their strength may have marginally declined in the years following 1971, especially after some spells of repatriation to India consequent on the Amendment of the Shastri-Sirimavo Accord of 1964, and after the Indira-Sirimavo Agreement of 1974.

The Highland Tamils (also known as Malaiha Tamils) are quite distinct from the Tamils of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, and have led a practically disenfranchised existence for quite some time since the country’s independence in 1948. The recent landslide disaster – on 26 October 2014 at the Meeriyabeda tea estate in Koslanda village in Haldummulla division of Badulla district, a part of Uva province – with the resultant loss of many lives and enormous

In this paper, the author discusses the unique conditions regarding the ‘Hill Tamils’ of Sri Lanka that is not often in focus while discussing India-Sri Lanka relations.

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destruction of property, once again poignantly brought to public notice the economically deprived and disturbed livelihood conditions of the Highland Tamils. Most of them are workers in the tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona and coconut plantations of Badulla, Nuwaraeliya, Kandy and Matale – popularly known as Sri Lanka’s Hill Country. Such landslides are not a new phenomenon, and have been occurring at periodic intervals since 1947 in the plantation zone of the area. These occur mainly because of the lack of adequate soil protection measures, over-exploitation of the soil resources by the Sri Lankan authorities, and the mis-management of the plantations, resulting in the degradation of the land for cash crops, and disruption in the lives of the estate workers who are predominantly Tamils.

The Highland Tamils have a unique history. Tamil agricultural workers, particularly the landless ones and mainly from the depressed and lowest caste groups, were initially recruited by Governor Sir Edward Barnes in 1827, to work as indentured labourers in the establishment of the tea, coffee, rubber and coconut plantations (tea is the major plantation crop) in the Highland districts of Ceylon – that is, present-day Sri Lanka. These Tamil workers (a very limited number were also of Telugu and Malayalee origin) came from the erstwhile Madras Presidency districts of Tanjore, Trichy, Arcot, Madurai, Pudukottai and Ramnad. The recruitment of such Tamil people increased after the 1840s and, since then, the community has contributed significantly to the agro-economic development of these Sri Lankan Highland districts, to the country’s economy and export growth, and thereby to the overall well-being of Sri Lanka and its citizens. However, this has been done without their obtaining fully the concomitant socio-economic benefits, or being politically integrated into the country’s polity.

In the first place, the Highland Tamils were not able to obtain regular Ceylonese citizenship because of their Indian antecedents, as the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 was so devised to deny citizenship to those who could not prove a stipulated pre-determined period of residency in the country. However, these Tamils were not eager to go back to the country of their origin because the economic conditions in their original home districts in the erstwhile Madras state (later Tamil Nadu) were not very attractive. Interestingly, these Tamils outnumbered the Sri Lankan Tamils of the Northern and Eastern parts of the country when the country became independent.

The disenfranchised state of the Highland Tamils was brought about through the above-mentioned Ceylon Citizenship Act, the India-Pakistan Citizenship Act, and the Parliamentary Elections Act – all enacted just after

the Sri Lanka's independence. The resulting disenfranchisement induced the Government of India, from time to time, to press the Sri Lankan Government to confer regular citizenship status to the Highland Tamils. A landmark in this respect was the Shastri-Sirimavo Accord between the Prime Ministers of the two countries in October 1964. As per the Accord, it was decided that 300,000 of the Hill Country or Highland Tamils would be conferred Sri Lankan citizenship, and 525,000 Tamils were to be repatriated to India. The entire process of according Sri Lankan citizenship and repatriation to India was to be completed over a 15-year period since the date of the Accord. The Accord, however, left the status of 150,000 such Tamils, including children (which would grow by way of natural increase) undecided. Sri Lanka's Census of 1981 indicated, that in 1981, the number of Indian Tamils (as distinct from the Tamils of Jaffna and the Eastern districts) was 825,000.

The Accord of 1964 was severely criticised by many political leaders in India. Indian Opposition leaders – like Acharya Kripalani and many other parliamentarians, both from within the Government and from the Opposition – were of the opinion that the Accord was absolutely against India, and quite unjust to the people affected especially since it had been concluded without their consent. There was a considered view in many quarters that the above-cited India-Sri Lanka Accord was violative of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly its constituent Article 15 which declares that, 'everyone has a right to a nationality (and) no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his or her nationality nor denied the right to change his or her nationality'.

At the present juncture, when there is an apparent scope for a re-look and opportunities of giving a new impetus to India-Sri Lanka ties, it would fulfil both New Delhi's humanitarian obligations to a deprived group of people who originated from India in the not-too-distant a past, as also Colombo's responsibility to improve the socio-economic conditions of these people who have contributed significantly – and continue to do so – to the Sri Lanka's GDP as well as its export earnings. Moreover, they have already wholeheartedly accepted Sri Lankan integrity and nationhood. The new Government of Sri Lanka should take up a comprehensive programme to improve their living conditions, and consolidate their political status at par with the local Sinhalese settled in the districts concerned. So far as Government of India's economic assistance to Sri Lanka is concerned, it may be so designed to have a component which will fund the setting up of an education infrastructure, and upgrading the earning skills of the Highland Tamils. Such interventions may be justified on the grounds that these Tamil plantation workers record the lowest educational levels and health indices in independent

Sri Lanka, despite the widely acclaimed beneficial outcomes of the country's welfare status. Till recently, literacy rates in the Highlands were just above 20 per cent, and only 20 per cent of these have Secondary education and 2 per cent post-Secondary education. Nearly 40 per cent of the children of the workers below the age of 5 years were under-nourished, and the infant mortality rate was more than 60 per cent, as against 25 per cent in the country as a whole.

In Tamil Nadu, the issue of the Highland Tamils of Sri Lanka does not seem to evoke any emotive involvement at present. The reason for this absence could be the outcome of the undue attention paid to the Jaffna Tamils, the struggle of the LTTE, the larger numbers of Tamils associated with the earlier cause of a Tamil Eelam, and probably to an extent because the lower caste orientation of the highland Tamils. The national political parties of India – like the BJP, the Congress, and the two Communist parties in particular – could choose to pursue the cause of the Highland Tamils with an underlying socio-economic objective, so that the welfare of the affected people – practically disinherited for a considerable period – improves substantively. The new government in Sri Lanka may consider the present new milieu – both bilaterally in the India-Sri Lanka context as well as in the post-presidential election environment – as an opportunity to assimilate the Highland Tamils in that country's polity and economy in a substantive sense.

The contestants in the recent Sri Lankan presidential election – Rajapakse and Sirisena – had declared their willingness to work for the welfare of the Highland Tamils. The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) – the main political organisation avowedly interested in the welfare of these people – continue to declare their abiding commitment to their socio-economic welfare. The CWC leaders Savumiamoorthy Thondaman (the earlier President) and Arumugam Thondaman (the current President) have always succeeded in aligning with the ruling party and their leader in the country's politics. While power sharing has been achieved by the CWC leaders, their past track record does not inspire confidence regarding any intrinsic involvement and commitment at an operative level in terms of any socio-economic progress or their empowerment with adequate space in the country's polity. In fact, there was widespread anger against Thondaman (a Minister in Rajapakse's government) in the Highland plantations after the recent Meeriyabedya landslide when there was no manifest evidence of proactive action on the part of the CWC towards goading the Sri Lankan local and central administrative authorities for initiating appropriate relief and disaster mitigation measures. In other words, the credibility of the CWC in the matter of promoting the welfare of the Highland

Tamils does not seem to be very high at present.

In the above context, it may be in India's interest to work for the welfare of these people within the present Sri Lankan governance framework, and also through back-channel contacts process with mainstream political parties: that is, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). The citizenship issue has seemingly receded to the background, and it is the welfare aspect which looms large now. Though the number of such Tamils yet to be enfranchised may not be significant, there may still be a segment (though difficult to estimate their present number authoritatively), in a virtually stateless position. The Government of India may not find it too difficult to gently persuade the new Sirisena regime to politically empower them. The moot point is that by giving citizenship and voting rights to the limited residual Highland Tamils, the political balance of power within Sri Lanka for government formation, both at the central level and in the provinces, will not really alter unfavourably vis-a-vis the Sinhalas and the persons of Buddhist faith. Of the total 225 parliamentary seats, the number of Highland Tamils in the electorate is decisive in 34 seats only: Badulla 9, Nuwaraeliya 8, Kandy 12, and Matale 5. While the citizenship issue could be pursued in a low-key manner, the emphasis may be on the improving their socio-economic conditions and earning capabilities, so far left behind in Sri Lanka's growth endeavour.

During President Sirisena's recent visit to India, the Resettlement Minister D.M. Swaminathan (a member of the presidential delegation) expressed the need for India's assistance in constructing 20,000 houses for the workers in the plantations in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The Government of India could consider this an opportunity to promote the welfare of the Highland Tamils since it will no doubt have positive ramifications on the bilateral relations of the two countries. Though no commitment regarding the above was explicitly conveyed by India during the latest India-Sri Lanka summit meeting in New Delhi, sufficient opportunities remain in the future for India to invest in this aspect even within the existing ambit of the more than US\$ 1 billion investment under execution in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it would be appropriate if Prime Minister Modi make a symbolic visit to the Highlands during his forthcoming state visit to Sri Lanka. Such a visit could be accompanied by a visit to the sacred Dalada Maligawa temple (the Temple of the Sacred Tooth revered by the Sinhalas) in Kandy. Both these would be greatly appreciated by the Sinhalas as well as by Sri Lanka's Highland Tamils.

In the present scenario, the formulation of a carefully targeted economic assistance policy and the working out of lines of credit for development

programmes and projects, with ownership in the hands of the Highland Tamil community, by the Government of India are called for. The redeeming aspect is that, currently, the interest and involvement of political circles in Tamil Nadu in any policy vis-à-vis the Highland Tamils of Sri Lanka is relatively low, and thus the Government of India need not expect any undue domestic fallout or any internal pressures to do more. The outcome of a policy on the above-mentioned lines can only be positive – both from the point of view of India’s national interest as well as from a humanitarian angle. In the post-Rajapakse context, there may not be any inhibitions – or indeed any explicit opposition – from the new government in Sri Lanka as well as by its majority linguistic and religious communities to such an approach by India. Such assistance or involvement by a northern neighbour may not be viewed by the present political dispensation in Sri Lanka as well by a large middle spectrum of the population as detrimental to the unity of the Sri Lankan state; neither will it alter the preponderance of the majority communities in the current domestic political milieu of India’s southern neighbour.

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