
Role of Domestic Politics in India-Sri Lanka Relations

Nitin A Gokhale

The conviction in September 2014 of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalitha in an 18-year old corruption case will have a far-reaching impact on politics in the Dravidian state. But the consequences of the verdict are likely to have far-reaching effects even for India's policy towards its southern neighbour, Sri Lanka. Jayalalitha, whose party the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) rules Tamil Nadu with a handsome majority in the legislative assembly and has the third largest number of members in the Lower House of India's Parliament, has been a strident critic of New Delhi's approach towards Colombo, especially its stand on the thorny issue of Indian fishermen getting caught by the Sri Lankan Navy in the Palk Strait that separates the two countries.

Although her party will continue to rule Tamil Nadu (she will take some time to return to the Chief Minister's chair, if at all), Jayalalitha's diminished clout is likely to provide some breathing space to the Centre in trying to repair its relationship with Sri Lanka, severely damaged by the events of the past five years, especially after the end of Eelam War IV—the final Sri Lankan military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, which concluded in May 2009.

To understand the 'on-off' relationship between New Delhi and Colombo, a closer look at the past decade is, therefore, essential. When Sri Lanka launched its military offensive against the LTTE in 2005, New

Mr Nitin A Gokhale is former Security and Strategic Affairs Editor, NDTV, New Delhi.

Delhi was caught in a dilemma born out of domestic political compulsions. As a country, India wanted the LTTE to be ruthlessly eliminated but the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress Party at the Centre, was heavily dependent for its survival in Parliament on the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a party that was considered a close ally of the LTTE and even seen as a facilitator in Tamil Nadu. For the Manmohan Singh government, therefore, it was a tightrope walk in dealing with the Sri Lankan situation.

It is important to remember that the UPA's first stint in power (2004-09) coincided with the beginning of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's tenure in Sri Lanka. He took over as President in late 2005 and immediately paid a visit to New Delhi. India was aware of Rajapaksa's intention to take the LTTE head on. Although in the initial days, he was advised to seek a negotiated settlement with the Tigers, New Delhi saw merit in Rajapaksa's argument that the LTTE was only biding its time to regroup and rearm itself and that war was inevitable sooner than later. And if the LTTE was preparing for a showdown, Rajapaksa did not want to be caught off guard either. His armed forces needed to be ready for any eventuality.

The President, therefore, sent his brothers Basil and Gotabaya, to New Delhi with a shopping list for essential weapons and equipment that the Sri Lankan armed forces needed. The shopping list included air defence weapons, artillery guns, Nishant UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) and laser designators for PGMs (Precision-Guided Munitions).

Initially, New Delhi was non-committal. Top officials involved in the talks on either side claimed that in its typical bureaucratic style, New Delhi neither said yes nor no to the visiting Sri Lankans. So the two brothers went back slightly disappointed but were still hopeful of getting Indian help. Outwardly, India did adopt a hands-off policy vis-à-vis the Sri Lanka conflict. But that was because of domestic political compulsions born out of the fact that the ruling UPA government in New Delhi was dependent upon the DMK party from Tamil Nadu for its survival in the

Parliament. So, publicly India maintained that it would not give Sri Lanka any offensive weapons.

Yet, in early 2006, India quietly gifted five Mi-17 helicopters to the Sri Lankan Air Force. The only Indian condition was that these helicopters would fly under Sri Lankan Air Force colours. New Delhi clearly did not want to annoy the UPA's Tamil Nadu allies like the DMK unnecessarily. The Mi-17s were in addition to a Sukanya class Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) gifted by the Indian Coast Guard to the Sri Lankan Navy. Sri Lankan defence sources later said that these helicopters played a major role in several daring missions launched by the Sri Lankan Air Force to rescue the Army's deep penetration units and the eight-man teams whenever they were surrounded by the LTTE's counter-infiltration units or when injured soldiers had to be airlifted from deep inside LTTE-held territory.

But hampered by domestic compulsions, New Delhi could not go beyond such meagre and clandestine transfer of military hardware. And publicly all that India was willing to acknowledge was the supply of low-flying detection "Indra" radars to the Sri Lankan Air Force since this equipment was considered defensive apparatus. Colombo, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly restless since an all-out war with the LTTE looked inevitable. The Rajapaksa regime was nothing if not shrewd. It knew the past history well. It was aware of the dynamics that determined India's domestic politics in the context of Tamil Nadu. It was also conscious of India's anxiety in losing strategic space in Sri Lanka.

But, above all, the Rajapaksa brothers were pragmatic enough to realise that Sri Lanka needed India's support in the prosecution of the war against the LTTE, total support from China and Pakistan notwithstanding, simply because India was Sri Lanka's next door big neighbour. Colombo could ignore India but only up to a point.

The final phase of the war was marked by allegations of massive human rights violations and war crimes, with human rights organisations

worldwide accusing the Sri Lankan government forces of firing on so-called ‘no-fire zones’ in which thousands of Tamil civilians had sought shelter. During this final phase of the war, India played a key role in warding off international pressure on Sri Lanka. After the end of the war, New Delhi went so far as to support the Sri Lankan government in a special session at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on May 28, 2009, voting against a motion that called for an investigation of war crimes. India also helped Colombo in the post-war reconstruction effort by providing financial assistance for infrastructure projects and humanitarian assistance for the displaced population.

Post-2009, however, domestic pressure by Tamil Nadu forced the Indian government to join international calls for an investigation of human rights violations and war crimes. In a significant departure from its previous approach, in March 2012 and March 2013, New Delhi voted in favour of US-sponsored UNHRC resolutions that asked the Sri Lankan government to fulfil its commitments and take actions to ensure justice, accountability and reconciliation (2012) and to carry out an independent investigation into alleged human rights law and humanitarian law violations (2013), respectively. This was a substantial shift in New Delhi’s approach, which had always been opposed to country-specific resolutions and to interference in the internal affairs of third countries. Colombo did not take this change in India’s stance kindly.

New Delhi also used all its leverage with Colombo to hold provincial council elections in the Tamil-dominated Northern Province of Sri Lanka in a first and long-delayed step towards the devolution of power and the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which provides for the establishment of a system of provincial councils. The elections were ultimately held on September 21, 2013, leading to an overwhelming victory for the Tamil National Alliance.

The most obvious example of domestic politics casting a shadow over India’s policy towards Sri Lanka came in November 2013 when the 23rd

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in Colombo. The Sri Lankan government had wanted to use this event to regain international legitimacy after the controversy over the UNHRC votes and the repeated doubts on its human rights record.

The participation of India's Prime Minister in the CHOGM meeting was, therefore, considered absolutely essential. But ahead of the CHOGM, both main Tamil parties—the AIADMK and DMK—appealed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to boycott the summit. Several ministers in Singh's Cabinet who hail from Tamil Nadu – among them then Finance Minister P. Chidambaram – were opposed to the prime minister's participation in the CHOGM. A broad coalition of actors from Tamil Nadu, therefore, forced the weakened Manmohan Singh to boycott the meeting despite the foreign policy establishment's argument against it. Officials in the Ministry of External Affairs pointed out that New Delhi needed to keep some leverage on the Rajapaksa regime if only to get the Sri Lankan government to work for the welfare of minority Tamils in Sri Lanka. However, after a huge domestic debate, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ultimately decided not to participate in the CHOGM, further alienating Colombo.

But all that was in the past. Since May 26, 2014, when Narendra Modi took charge at the centre as Prime Minister, a subtle shift in India's policy towards its neighbours is evident. In a move that surprised many, Modi invited all the heads of states from the South Asian region for his oath taking ceremony. By doing so, he demonstrated that the central pillar of his foreign policy will be to accord priority to India's neighbourhood and pay particular attention to ensuring friendly neighbours. In the process, he simultaneously defined the contours of his government's policy for India's neighbourhood and outlined India's geographic area of immediate strategic interest.

With an overwhelming and strong mandate behind him, Modi does not need to depend on the Tamil Nadu parties for survival in the Lok

Sabha although his government does need the AIADMK's support in the Rajya Sabha, especially in ushering in legislative changes. So how will Prime Minister Modi deal with the Sri Lanka policy vis-à-vis Tamil Nadu politics? His government is likely to follow a two-track approach: expand India's trade and cultural ties with Sri Lanka, on the one hand, while, at the same time, continuing to exert pressure on Colombo to fully implement the 13th Amendment to its Constitution and working with the Sri Lankan government to ensure that minority Tamils get their rightful due within the framework of Sri Lanka's existing political and constitutional architecture.

One big challenge to India's Sri Lanka policy will come from China's growing influence on Colombo. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government has played New Delhi against Beijing with great deftness over the past decade and reaped considerable benefits from that policy. New Delhi should be pragmatic enough to realise that it has indeed ceded space to China in the neighbourhood and especially in Sri Lanka due to its own flip-flops in dealing with Colombo. The Modi government should, therefore, focus on regaining its foothold in the island nation by following a more pragmatic policy that is not constrained by domestic considerations and is based purely on India's national interest.