

It is interesting to note that the major rival countries attempt to use Sri Lanka for their economic as well as strategic ends, while Sri Lanka, in turn, uses the same concerns of those very countries for its economic as well as security needs. In a way, it could be interpreted that Sri Lanka, after committing blunders in handling the international forces in the eighties, have been somewhat successful in managing those forces, in spite of it being repeatedly accused of human rights violations by some of those countries.

However, the current increasing involvement of the major powers, especially India, China and the US in Sri Lanka's economic field is being taken by many as Sri Lanka increasingly becoming a seat of power play for those forces.

India constantly has an eye on the developments in Sri Lanka. The ethnic strife in Sri Lanka continued to be an eyesore to India creating a situation of dilemma for the Indian leaders.

India's dilemma concerning the developments in Sri Lanka stems from both its bitter past experience involving the Indian troops, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) between 1987 and 1990 and the assassination of its former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, on one hand, and its strategic interests in the region, on the other.

Sri Lanka's need for crushing the Tamil rebels necessitated it to obtain more and more weapons, military training and funding from other countries. The Sri Lankan leaders strengthened links, in this regard, with Pakistan, China and the US. And more international involvement began to take shape with the signing of the ceasefire agreement between the Government and the LTTE in 2002, by way of a ceasefire monitoring and international assistance for the rehabilitation of the northern and eastern provinces

One option left with India to minimize fingering by other powerful countries in Sri Lanka endangering its strategic interests was to fulfil Sri Lanka's needs. However, the homogeneity of the peoples across the Palk Strait (in northern Sri Lanka and South India) which always invited spillovers of Sri Lankan tensions across the Strait into Tamilnadu had restrained India from doing this.

The upshot, which seems to be an attempt to strike a balance, was a latent Indian stance on Sri Lanka's ethnic strife, with signs of support to the Sri Lankan government's military efforts at times as well as signs of sympathy towards Tamil concerns at some other times.

Also Sri Lankan leaders seem to attempt to use India's concerns for the country's military as well as development needs. India was given access to build a coal power plant in Sampur in close proximity to Trincomalee. Interestingly India along with its rival in the region, China has been selected to rebuild the northern railway line that was destroyed by the LTTE.

The idea behind involving India seemed to be that when Indian interests increase in the north and east, the giant neighbour would have to have a stake in the security sector as well, in those areas. A bridge between the two countries was under consideration during former Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe's time.

In June last year Sri Lanka had submitted a proposal to India on renovating parts of the strategic Kankesanthurai (KKS) harbour. For India, presence at KKS would be important because of its proximity to its southern coast. This had to be viewed with India's seeming interest in the Trincomalee harbour

However, the vacuum created by India's dilemma on providing support to Sri Lanka's military effort against the LTTE before May, last year, was also filled somewhat by China by helping Sri Lanka with military hardware as well as economic assistance. The crown of the recent Chinese support to Sri Lanka was the agreement on Hambantota harbour, near one of the world's biggest shipping lanes. However, considering the strategic contest between India and China in the Indian Ocean region, any India-Sri Lanka deal does not seem to match with the deal to fund the Hambantota harbour project by China. The primary objective of the Hambantota project is to synchronize different aspects of development such as shipping, trans-shipment, shipbuilding, and catering to increase exports and imports, for which the Port of Colombo does not have enough space and facilities.

Major powers in the world seem not to consider the Hambantota project merely as an economic venture, given the geographical location of Sri Lanka. The country lies astride the major sea lanes of communication from Europe to East Asia and the oil tanker routes from the oil producing countries of the Gulf to China, Japan and other Pacific countries. In the military sense it is important to the United States as these same sea routes are used for transference of naval power from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean and the Gulf.

On last Thursday, the "Japan Times" said that "China's involvement in Sri Lanka has inevitably raised speculation that Hambantota is the latest jewel in a so-called "string of pearls" that will pave the way for China's rapidly expanding navy to operate routinely in the Indian Ocean from secure bases in the region." The phrase "string of pearls," is one that was first used by a U.S. Navy study for the Pentagon. China's other "pearls" in southern Asia include the port of Gwadar in Pakistan.

Apart from this, a China-Sri Lanka agreement will finance the building of a highway from Colombo to the international airport in Katunayaka. China also has offered an \$891 million, 20-year loan with a 2 percent interest rate to build the second and third phases of the 900 megawatt coal-fired Norochcholai power plant.

Meanwhile, China's increasing involvement has seemingly prompted the US too to re-evaluate its approach towards Sri Lanka. This has been very openly said in the report titled "SRI LANKA: RECHARTING U.S. STRATEGY AFTER THE WAR" and issued by the Committee on the Foreign Relations of the US Senate on December 7, last year. Here are some of the randomly picked up parts from the report.

"As Western countries became increasingly critical of the Sri Lankan Government's handling of

the war and human rights record, the Rajapaksa leadership cultivated ties with such countries as Burma, China, Iran, and Libya.

“This strategic drift will have consequences for U.S. interests in the region. Along with our legitimate humanitarian and political concerns, U.S. policymakers have tended to underestimate Sri Lanka’s geo-strategic importance for American interests. Sri Lanka is located at the nexus of crucial maritime trading routes in the Indian Ocean connecting Europe and the Middle East to China and the rest of Asia.

“The United States cannot afford to “lose” Sri Lanka.

“The Obama administration is currently weighing a new strategy for relations with Sri Lanka. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has closely followed events on the ground this year ...

The recommendations include a broader and more robust U.S. approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geo-strategic interests;

~ dailymirror.lk ~ By M.S.M. Ayub