

Strangely as it may seem there is speculation, which is said to have been instigated by a certain political party for reasons best known to it, that India is not playing the role which was expected of her after the war was over and that Colombo is displeased. It is also being stated that India is concerned at the non implementation of the 13th Amendment, as promised by the President many times over, thus creating a credibility gap and lastly, that India is concerned about Sri Lanka's relationship with China and the Chinese building the Hambantota Port. Whether all this is entirely true we do not know but certainly this perception of the situation with regard to Sri Lanka's relationship with India is being spread by many influential persons in this country and is not helpful. It does appear that the intention is to spoil the relationship between the two countries for local political gain.

The importance of Indo-Lanka relations was best described by former President thus: "India is our immediate neighbour, with whom we have been inextricably bound by ties the origins of which have long been lost in the mist of time. We have with India the broadest and deepest interaction that we as a nation could have with another state. India, therefore, possesses the capacity, given her vastly disparate strength and influence, to help or hinder to a great extent. In a word, the Indian factor is crucial to the existence of our nation. Forging and sustaining a mutually trusting and supportive friendship with India must therefore be for us, not just a conscious and soundly judged policy, it is a natural and vital ingredient for our national well being."

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has gone on record that he would never allow Sri Lanka to become a platform for anti-Indian activities by any country. He has gone on to describe India and Sri Lanka as "each other's heart and soul" and emphasized the fact that our people, our culture, our languages, our spiritual values all come from India. With regard to the Hambantota Port construction he has stated that it is purely a commercial transaction. The President has also conceded that India has vital strategic interests in Sri Lanka. He has stated: "We need to understand India's interests, in our own interest".

India's policy towards this country has not been absolutely consistent but that is a luxury that they can afford but we need to be always mindful of India's sensitivities. This government appears to have recognized this fact and the recent visits of Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Secretary to President Lalith Weeratunge to India were excellent examples of constructive diplomacy; both India and Sri Lanka can congratulate themselves on their cool-headed diplomacy in reaching common ground on a cluster of vexing issues that have recently been at the root of some nagging intra-state and inter-state troubles between the two neighbours.

India's oft-stated 'mantra' with regard to Sri Lanka's ethnic problem has been as follows:

"India supports the process of seeking a negotiated settlement acceptable to all sections of Sri Lanka society within the framework of a united Sri Lanka and consistent with democracy,

pluralism and respect for individual rights... India maintains an abiding interest in the security of Sri Lanka and remains committed to its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

India seeks to ensure that political instability in Sri Lanka will not affect India's domestic politics and threaten its own security in any manner. India seeks to expand India's own influence in Sri Lanka's domestic politics, especially over the ethnic issue to appease the Tamils in Tamil Nadu. She also seeks to become a significant partner in our economic development.

A new development we need to take account of is the special relationship that has come into existence between the US and India. There is little doubt that the US policy towards this country is conditioned by India's policy towards her. I recall the words of US Under Secretary of State Inderfurth: "We believe that India is the key outside power and that anything to be done by the international community must be done very much with India." The United States was 'well aware of the legitimate interest that India has in Sri Lanka'. Today, as stated earlier the relationship between these two countries is closer than ever before. I recall the time when this country was subverted because it cultivated a close relationship with the US for entirely economic reasons. Be that as it may, India has always pledged that she remains committed to Sri Lanka's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

A new factor which has become a matter of concern for India has been Sri Lanka's relationship with China. That relationship has always been close but we have never given India any reason to be concerned but with the expansion of the Chinese Navy to ensure the security of the foreign energy supply and the need to ensure the safety of her trade so critical for her in her march towards super power status, a new situation has arisen. The increasing importance of the Indian Ocean has given rise to this new situation.

With China having privileged facilities at Guarda in Pakistan and at Chittagong in Bangladesh, India is particularly concerned that with the Hambantota Port being developed with Chinese aid, we may give the Chinese Navy facilities there. That would constitute a naval necklace round the neck of India, but as stated earlier, I believe the Sri Lankan government has given an absolute assurance to the Indian government that it would never do anything that would endanger the security of India.

The huge surplus which China presently at present acquired has brought the US closer and the recent visit of Hillary Clinton may usher in a new era as did President Nixon's ground breaking visit. An interdependent relationship between these two powers would certainly be beneficial for the entire region.

The growing importance of the Indian Ocean and the rivalry that would result from the competition for resources and markets by the two emerging super powers India and China are indeed new challenges for us. The role that the US would play in the developing situation would also be of extreme interest to us. The US would, no doubt, be as concerned as India over the close relationship that exists between China and Sri Lanka. The Chinese are investing in building a huge Navy to protect their shipping and their presence in the Indian Ocean would be considered a threat by India and the US. Let us hope that a new Cold War will not develop in the Indian Ocean region. Our diplomacy would have to reach a new dimension for we may not

have the luxury of practising equidistant diplomacy as the fact of geography may not allow for it.

As for the future, whilst we need to address the political issue without further procrastination, which has admittedly led to a certain credibility gap which is not in our interest, we need also to strengthen our relationship with India with greater bilateral economic cooperation. In this regard, Economic Integration or the CEPA may not be the answer as local businesses fear that they may be swamped by huge Indian Corporations. It is in the interest of both countries that all Indian Investment should be only in the form of joint ventures. Even if the Indo-Lanka companies are quoted on the Stock Exchange, they should be statutorily protected against 'Take-Overs', as happened in the case of Apollo hospital. Yet another area which needs to be protected in the mutual interest would be the service sector and professions. We could even revive the Defence Cooperation Agreement which was initiated by the UNF government. It would be in our mutual interest and allay all fears on both sides of the Palk Strait. But, we would need to do a trade off by requesting India to abandon once and for all time the Sethusamudram Project, which, as Prof. Willie Mendis has repeatedly pointed out, is harmful to this country and as that foremost shipping expert David Soysa pointed out in a valuable article some time ago, an Indian Minister of Shipping has repeatedly threatened to cut off Indian transshipment to Colombo after the completion of the Sethu project. We should get that threat out of the way. We should also develop close relations with the southern States of India and their leaders, for it is with them that we had exclusive relations till 1815.

That Indo-Lanka relations have hit a bad patch is an absolute canard. India is, indeed, helping Sri Lanka in many ways including in the matter of rehabilitating former LTTE cadres and her High Commissioner here has in his own quiet way achieved much. He has managed the sensitive relationship with unprecedented success and without fanfare in the best traditions of the service and the profession he belongs to. It has been mentioned that his tour of duty here is coming to an end this year, whilst we wish him well, we should be happy that a true friend of Sri Lanka, Nirupama Rao, the last HC here, has assumed duties as Foreign Secretary in New Delhi.

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