

The memorial in Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte dedicated to the 1155 soldiers who were killed with the Indian Peace Keeping Force.

Our small neighbours like Sri Lanka, Nepal or Bangladesh disagree with our strategic community's perceptions regarding China.

The Sri Lankans are ace practitioners of diplomacy. The sheer coincidence is breathtaking that they chose India's Independence Day to hold the first memorial service at the IPKF memorial in Kotte for the brave Indian soldiers who laid down their lives between 1987 and 1990 — as well as to unveil Sri Lanka's new China-funded port at Hambantota.

Colombo poses a riddle in neighbourhood diplomacy. From all accounts of what Indian diplomacy is up to in Kathmandu, Delhi may have a long, painful learning curve ahead in its dealings with its small neighbours.

Take Sri Lanka. The first phase of the \$1.5 billion Hambantota port development project (with a Chinese credit line of \$425 million) has been successfully completed despite Delhi's aversion to the project on geopolitical grounds and its spurning of the Sri Lankan offer to be its sponsor. Colombo has made clear that India cannot dictate its developmental programme.

Now, contrary to the hullabaloo by the security czars in our strategic community, it appears Hambantota is not a 'pearl in a string' that Beijing is kneading to tighten its hold on India's jugular veins, but it is essentially what it is proclaimed to be — a vital transportation hub in the Indian Ocean sea lanes.

Conceivably, Hambantota is of immense interest to China as a key, almost-irreplaceable link in a new transportation route to the markets in the Persian Gulf, Africa and Europe that bypasses Malacca Strait which is under American control. Period.

Now the Indian dilemma really begins. Colombo has once again approached Delhi as its first choice as foreign partner to fund and spearhead the construction of the second phase of Hambantota. In short, Delhi has been given the great privilege of topping up the jewel in China's crown in Sri Lanka. Will Delhi accept the offer? If it doesn't, the likelihood is that Colombo may again approach Beijing. Look at the deep irony of what the Sri Lankan demarche with Delhi means: Colombo seeks Delhi's help to expand a regional transportation hub in the Indian Ocean a principal user of which could, conceivably, be Beijing.

The timing of the two events in Kotte and Hambantota on Sunday underscores Colombo's message that it is ultimately the monarch of all it surveys with regard to Sri Lanka's interests and it shall have India and China to fulfill specific roles that serve its interests.

This stark message from the southern tip of India resonates all the way to the Himalayan

foothills. It is about time before Nepal too teaches India a thing or two about neighbourhood diplomacy. The Indian interference in Nepal's domestic affairs is rising dangerously close to the threshold of Delhi's shenanigans in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s.

Interference in Nepal

Indian diplomacy is determined that the Maoists who despite holding a solid 40 per cent bloc of seats but has fallen short of an absolute majority in the highly-fractured Nepalese Constituent Assembly needs to be 'punished' and cannot be allowed to lead the government — and in particular, the Maoist candidate for prime minister Prachanda. Delhi's antipathy toward Prachanda bears striking similarity to its antipathy toward J R Jayewardene in the early 1980s — except, of course, that while Jayewardene's cardinal 'mistake' was his 'pro-American' leanings, Prachanda's would be his perceived 'pro-China' leanings.

Is Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa 'pro-Chinese,' too? There has been a sharp upward curve in the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka under Rajapaksa's dispensation. But one has to be really woolly-headed to overlook that Rajapaksa is first and foremost a nationalist. Arguably, Prachanda will be no different.

Like in Sri Lanka where we tried and failed miserably to dictate the terms of the ebb and flow of its domestic affairs, Delhi's diplomacy in Kathmandu — essentially, blatant arm-twisting and crude blackmail — is destined to crash-land. Simply put, the Rajapaksas and Prachandas represent the forces of history and if Delhi's diplomacy is to be savvy, it must learn to be on the right side of history. Conversely, as our miserable, ill-fated Sri Lankan saga testifies, we simply don't have the wherewithal to stonewall the forces of history.

Small countries possess surprisingly high levels of tenacity in defining their self-interests. As the Kotte ceremony poignantly shows, Sri Lankan diplomacy astutely redefined the original IPKF expedition to serve as its instrument and a painful point came when all we wanted was to cut and run away.

Paradoxically, the Colombo political elite gave us a short breather and then they came looking for us to extract all the help they needed to crush Tamil separatism — so that India won't have any leverage to interfere in Sri Lankan affairs and would instead settle for its due role as a responsible neighbour.

To rub salt into the wound, Rajapaksa is now underscoring to us the wisdom of working shoulder to shoulder with China for the development of his country. There is another big lesson here for Indian diplomacy. Our small neighbours like Sri Lanka and Nepal —or Bangladesh, for that matter — completely disagree with our strategic community's perceptions regarding China.

They see China's rise as offering a huge window of opportunity for their economic development. In the ensuing geopolitical paradigm, we will only end up as losers unless we reset our neighbourhood policy to dovetail it with the choices and national priorities of the small

neighbours who share our region. (Courtesy: Nepal today.com)

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