

Annual Review of India- Sri Lanka Relations

By Anushree Ghisad

Until the recent past, Sri Lanka and India, the only neighbours separated by Palk Strait and having civilizational and historic linkages, had witnessed strain in the ties. The momentum of strengthening bilateral relations was set up when the Modi-led Indian government embarked upon the 'neighborhood first' foreign policy with special emphasis on maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region. These attempts were well reciprocated by the newly elected Sirisena government.

Unlike its predecessors, the present Indian government is not held back by the compulsions of coalition politics and thus, the response of this government is not constrained by the politics of Tamil Nadu, whose ethnic people in Sri Lanka have been at the center of decades long Civil War. Similarly, the change of government in Sri Lanka and the defeat of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa have also been collectively seen as an opportunity to start a new chapter in the bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and India.

These changed political circumstances in India and Sri Lanka and the subsequent actions taken by the leaders of the respective countries have raised expectations of their relationship being rebooted. Many important events transpired throughout the year 2015 with regards to the India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations, which are discussed in this paper.

Political Relations

Sri Lanka saw a change of guard in year 2015, as the former Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena, after being fielded as the 'New Common Candidate' by a united opposition, was elected as the seventh President. This event was also touted as 'silent revolution of 8th January'. Sirisena appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe of United National party (UNP) as new Prime Minister (PM). Mr Wickremesinghe retained the office of PM in August 2015 Parliamentary elections. As of today, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by the President and UNP have formed a coalition for good governance to run the country.

The results of the elections in Sri Lanka have been welcomed in India for two reasons; one, although former President Rajapaksa successfully freed the country from the clutches of most terrifying separatists, he failed in implementing a political solution for addressing the ethnic Tamil aspirations. Two, he went a bit too far in securing cooperation with China which ruffled the Indian sensitivities.

With this backdrop, the new Sri Lankan government's actions in terms of reversal of executive presidency, inclusive agenda for Tamil and Muslim minorities and commitment to ensure justice for the victims of war crime during the last phase of

Elam war were hailed by the international community at various forums like United Nations and Commonwealth.

In the year 2015, the political relations between India and Sri Lanka were marked by high-level exchanges at regular intervals. The year gone by was in particular very exceptional as it saw five high level visits from both the sides. This re-emphasizes Indian government's 'neighborhood first' policy and spells-out clearly an unwritten norm which suggests that more are the visits between close friends, the better it is for their ties. From the Sri Lankan side, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera visited New Delhi in January 2015 on his first overseas official visit followed by President Sirisena's four-day visit in February, and the recent one being by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in mid-September.

From the Indian side, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Sri Lanka in the first week of March ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit. Modi's visit received an overwhelming response in Sri Lanka. He reiterated the importance of regional growth and that India's neighbours have first claim on India's development. His tactful emphasis on India's support for a "united" Sri Lanka was deeply appreciated given the mistrust in Sri Lanka of the perceived Indian intrusiveness, with regards to concerns over the Tamil question. Also, in a historic first for an Indian Prime Minister, Modi's visit to Jaffna clearly struck a chord with the Sri Lankan Tamil¹ community.

Sirisena government's commitment to inclusive agenda and democratic reforms has been exemplified from three events: one, in an attempt to reverse the blot of 'Executive Presidency', 19th constitutional amendment bill was passed in parliament merely within four months of Presidential elections; two, Tamil National Alliance's R. Sampanthan was appointed as Leader of Opposition post Parliamentary elections. Sampanthan has become the first Tamil leader to assume this office after a gap of 32 years; three, although Sirisena's '100 day action program' has been a partial success due to various political reasons, yet it has reinforced current government's intentions.

India has been closely monitoring these moves. According to Wickremesinghe, the Indian Prime Minister had praised Sri Lanka for appointing Tamil parliamentarian R. Sampanthan as the Leader of Opposition.

Owing to these positive developments, UNHRC delayed the release of international investigation report on Sri Lanka by 6 months. When the report was released in September 2015, Sri Lanka not only managed to remove the controversial clause of 'hybrid special courts' with a 'domestic judicial mechanism', but also showed its resolve in correcting the excesses in the past by co-sponsoring the resolution. This is seen as the biggest diplomatic victory for Sri Lanka, whose international reputation had suffered heavily during the three decades of Civil War. India had supported Sri Lanka in this endeavour.

This new political dispensation in Sri Lanka has adopted 'Sri Lanka first' foreign policy, which is clearly meant to serve its national interests and is not inclined towards any specific country, including both India and China.

Economic Relations

India and Sri Lanka enjoy a robust trade and investment relationship. Sri Lanka is India's largest trade partner in South Asia. India in turn is Sri Lanka's largest trade partner globally. Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the entry into India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000².

India's export to Sri Lanka has grown by 47.84 per cent for the fiscal year 2014-2015 as compared to 2013-2014, whereas India's import from Sri Lanka has also increased by 13.38 percent³. There has been a remarkable growth in import of edible vegetables, citrus fruits, melons, nuts, malt, wheat gluten, tanning and dyeing extracts, pharmaceutical products, beverages and spirits, essential oils and leather articles from Sri Lanka, while a noticeable drop in import of mineral fuels and oils, modified starch, parts of aircrafts and spacecraft, parts of railway or tramway locomotive, cotton and staple fibers has been seen. It is very clear from the above-mentioned statistics that India has substantive trade surplus in its trade ties with Sri Lanka. Also, efforts are needed to realize full potential of trade and investment sector and make it more even more dynamic for the two countries.

The present political dispensation in Sri Lanka has adopted a more flexible stance on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that had been languishing for long. During his visit to India, PM Wickremesinghe had said that he is hoping that a framework for economic cooperation could be agreed-on in principle by the end of 2015 and that the final agreements be 'in place' by mid-2016.

The Sri Lankan government has reservations on trade in service and not tariff barriers (NTBs) and thus, it is pitching for Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) instead of CEPA. The move has been viewed by some as an attempt to re-introduce CEPA under a different name. India wants to combine geostrategic objectives with geo-economics with rest of its global partners and is willing to replicate same with Sri Lanka. This is crucial for shaping bilateral relations, so that economic diplomacy starts taking precedence over political one, and CEPA can serve as a tool to fasten economic integration between India and Sri Lanka. It is also a prerequisite for the revival of SAARC.

Security Relations

Reinforcing the strong neighbourly ties underscored by extensive maritime interaction, the Indian and Sri Lankan Navies have undertaken the 4th edition of Sri Lanka-India Exercise (SLINEX) off Trincomalee, Sri Lanka from October 27 to November 1, 2015. Sri Lanka is also part of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which is a regional maritime cooperative initiative whose aim is to ensure

collective security and prosperity of the littoral states in the Indian Ocean Region. In order to build Military-to-Military co-operation and interoperability, Exercise 'Mitra Shakti'-2015 was conducted in Pune in October this year. Third annual Indo-Lankan defence dialogue concluded in September this year, while 5th Navy to Navy and 6th Air force to Air force talks are already done for this year. In order to bolster the defence ties, the former Indian coast guard ship *Varah* was gifted to Sri Lanka at Colombo port on August 27, 2015.

Barriers

It should not be construed that India–Sri Lanka relationship has always sailed smoothly. Given the independent foreign policies pursued by the two sovereign countries, it is not unnatural to expect some divergences on issues that are related to interests mutually harbored by them for the promotion of their respective national goals. Even in the year 2015 which can otherwise be dubbed as successful in the furthering of India-Sri Lanka ties, some irritants kept on cropping-up; some of which were frankly discussed by both the sides while some sticky issues remained unresolved.

Fishermen Issue

This has been the topmost irritant of the year inviting considerable media attention. Its humanitarian and livelihood dimensions make it a highly emotive issue for countries on either sides the common maritime boundary. This year, Fishermen's Association was involved in track-2 diplomacy, but this effort did not yield anything concrete. The challenge for India is to keep Indian fishing vessels from venturing into Sri Lankan waters. Only silver lining in the cloud is that both the parties have recognized the need to convert the contested territory into a common heritage, but have not yet figured as to how that can be achieved.

Attempts at Revival of LTTE

In June 2015, U.S released State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism for 2014 which acknowledges that Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) financial network of support continued to operate throughout 2014 despite its ineffectiveness. Mahinda Rajapaksa and his loyalists have hinted at the Tamil Diaspora's attempts to reactivate this Tamil insurgency movement. Although the reports appear to be a mixture of facts and fiction, India, being home to more than one lakh Tamil refugees has always maintained that it denounces all forms of terrorism and will never allow its land to be used for any activities that may be inimical to Sri Lanka.

Challenges

Despite the positive dynamics of the Indo-Sri Lanka bilateral relations, challenges abound. The challenges which span security and socio-economic domains are discussed further in succeeding paragraphs.

India's Security Concerns in IOR

The new Sri Lankan government has reservations with Chinese investment as they have realized that excessive dependence on a country which is flushing money to ensure strategic leverage is detrimental for sovereignty of the nation. Sirisena had talked of perils of neo-colonisation of Sri Lanka before the Presidential elections. Thus, this government, which talks about national interests first, is making the kind of moves to restrict the intrusive Chinese investments and is in a way assuaging India's security concerns in the Indian Ocean Region. But, it also needs to be recognized that Sri Lanka cannot do away with China given its independent foreign policy – which calls for maintaining sound relations with all major powers, including China. The Colombo Port City Project is set to resume by February 2016 and so is Hambantota phase three. Thus the real challenge for India is to provide Sri Lanka with a close understanding of its views on the “China factor”.

Chinese navy's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean comes in the background of the release of a White Paper published by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), outlining a new military strategy enhancing its navy's duties to "open seas protection" far from its shores. While accepting and abiding by the norms of UNCLOS of freedom of navigation in high seas, it needs to be acknowledged by our maritime neighbours that given the length of its coastline and size of its Naval force, India has traditionally been the 'Net Security Provider' of the region. Thus Indian Ocean cannot be a backyard for any outside player.

This does not preclude Sri Lanka from co-operating with China but it does necessitate that it should be cautious while drawing China into Indian Ocean Region.

Repatriation of Refugees

According to the Indian government figures, there are more than 100,000 ethnic Tamil Sri Lankans in the southern states of India, including 68,000 in 112 government-run camps and 32,000 outside the camps in the state of Tamil Nadu. In an effort to give boost to ethnic reconciliation, Sri Lanka's new government handed back 425 acres of military-held land to Tamil families in the country's north in March this year. Owing to such developments, the number of refugees returning to Sri Lanka has been remarkable since the end of fourth phase of Elam war. The move of setting up a Special Presidential Commission headed by former president Chandrika Kumaratunga on finding solution to the problems of Tamils, has been received well by international community, India and Global Tamil Forum. Yet, this number is miniscule as compared to the total number of refugees and more concrete steps needs to be taken in terms of employment opportunities and land grant to ensure safety of returned refugees. Their return is very important to the Tamil community on political front in Sri Lanka.

Combating Religious Extremism

The looming threat of Islamic State (IS) and its fringe elements over Indian subcontinent is as alarming as the official map of IS released in August 2015 includes India and Sri Lanka under the area of 'Khorasan'⁴. There are pockets of IS sympathizers in India and Sri Lanka along with proven presence of self-proclaimed saviors of their respective religions. If set in motion, such developments can deflect the already scanty chances of regional stability, peace and integration and hence a collective action plan needs to be deliberated upon to tackle this menace.

Conclusion

The year 2015 indeed heralds a new chapter in India- Sri Lanka relations. But, the general sense of optimism is balanced by concerns about other issues like continuing hostility from Tamil Nadu and fishermen's issue. Though the attempts by the government to win hearts and minds of war ravaged Sri Lankan Tamils are appreciated, they now seem to be subsumed under the Constitutional Amendment process. There is a rising fear among Tamil community that the devolution of power doesn't reduce to tokenism, yet by and large the minorities in Sri Lanka retains considerable faith in this government.

During high level visits, both the sides have agreed that our securities are interlinked and indivisible. Though the volume of bilateral trade has improved for fiscal year 2014-2015, there is much more scope for deepening the economic ties. The ancient civilizational linkages have already provided strong underpinnings to the present ties, spanning from dhamma to dharma for salvation seekers and Dhoni to Sangakkara for Cricket lovers.

Thirty years ago on in the month of December, SAARC was established with the aim of promoting welfare economics⁵, collective self-reliance and to accelerate socio-cultural⁶ development in the region. Let the robust and vibrant ties between India and Sri Lanka set a new benchmark in regional dynamics by adding substance to SAARC.

(Anushree Ghisad is a Research Intern at the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi. She can be reached at: anushreeghisad@vifindia.org)

ENDNOTES

¹ "Be patient with Sri Lankan govt.: Modi to Tamil leaders", The Hindu, March 14, 2015

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/be-patient-with-sri-lankan-govt-modi-to-tamil-leaders/article6991961.ece?ref=relatedNews>

² Sri Lanka Brief-August 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SrilankaBrief_August2015.pdf

³ Data from Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry <http://www.commerce.nic.in/eidb/ecntcom.asp>

⁴ "Sri Lanka security forces on alert on ISIS threat - Ministry", Colombo Page, January 6, 2016

http://www.colombopage.com/archive_16A/Jan06_1452097616CH.php

⁵ Welfare Economics, Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_economics

⁶ Sociocultural Evolution, Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocultural_evolution