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serious advocate of greater accountability of law enforcement agencies and armed forces, I feel a commonsense approach is required to resolve the issue rather than being emotive about it. A lot of statesmanship and diplomacy is required to do so. Indian leadership, particularly Tamil Nadu leaders, should take the initiative in doing this rather than using the human rights violations issue for their political ends.

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[Col R Hariharan a retired MI officer, served as the Head of intelligence with the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka 1987-90. He is associated with the Chennai Centre for China Studies and the South Asia Analysis Group. E-mail: colhari@yahoo.com. Blog: www.colhariharan.org]

(3) Dr. S. Kalyanaraman

Dr. S. Kalyanaraman is Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. An alumnus of Loyola College Chennai, he received his PhD in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi. Awarded the Nehru Centenary British Fellowship in 1995, he spent a year at Kings College London as Visiting Fellow. During 2007-2008, Dr. Kalyanaraman was a member of the official Indian delegation to the Carnegie Forum on Global Issues. He has represented IDSA at several other international forums and conferences, and has been invited to give lectures at the Army War College Mhow, Foreign Service Institute New Delhi, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy Hyderabad. Dr. Kalyanaraman has a number of publications to his credit including the article "Major Lessons from Operation Pawan for Future Regional Stability Operations" published in the Journal of Defence Studies. His most recent essay "Nehru's Advocacy of Internationalism and India's Foreign Policy" has been published as a chapter in India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases(Routledge, 2014).

1.India's Sri Lanka policy is considered a long litany of mistakes and wrong priorities.Sri Lanka was low among the foreign-policy priorities of the NDA government. And the United Progressive Alliance, throughout its time in office, did not go far enough to make a clear imprint on the public mind, especially in Tamil Nadu, that a definitive distinction was called for between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on the one hand and the Tamils of Sri Lanka on the other. Do you believe a course correction requires deep and dispassionate introspection?

There is no case for course correction in India's Sri Lanka policy. Since the onset of the ethnic conflict, India's policy has been driven by three

imperatives: devolution of political power to the Tamils, preservation of Sri Lanka's territorial integrity, and preventing external and rival powers from acquiring abiding influence in Sri Lanka. What it required and requires is convincing the Sri Lankan Tamils not to advocate independence but instead settle for autonomy, while at the same time convincing Colombo not to insist upon a unitary political system and instead move towards a federal set-up. While these Indian objectives appear to be a reasonable and honourable compromise from our perch at New Delhi, they have been unacceptable to the two protagonists in the conflict. Only India's forcible exercise of its military power in the late 1980s forced the two antagonists to agree to a temporary truce. But there were definite limits to how much military power India can exert beyond its border and for how long (even superpowers are not exempt from such limits).

Incidentally, the calculation made in 1987 that a direct Indian role would contribute towards a settlement was the major mistake made by India in all these years of engagement with the Sri Lankan ethnic issue.

Further, India's advocacy of compromise was unacceptable to the two protagonists, who also wanted India to completely side with them and against the other party. Colombo has been using New Delhi's fears about the role of external and rival powers in the region to moderate India's stance and ensure that India does not throw its full weight behind the Tamil cause. On the other side of this scale stand the people and political leaders of Tamil Nadu who want India to play a more forceful role in convincing Colombo to satisfy the genuine political aspirations of the Tamil people, especially now that the LTTE has been defeated and the 'war' won.

Allotting a higher priority to Sri Lanka in India's foreign policy is unlikely to contribute to a solution given the limited power and influence that India has to expend in this regard. A course correction would involve either siding with the Tamils or with the Sri Lankan government. The former course would antagonise Colombo and pave the way for a greater role for external and rival powers in Sri Lanka's affairs. The latter would have repercussions in India's domestic politics especially at a time when regional political parties have come to play such a prominent role in government formation at the Centre. Instead of a course correction, India needs to do more of the same: on one hand, expand its economic reconstruction assistance and other programmes in the Tamil areas, strengthen the economic partnership both bilaterally as well as multilaterally through SAARC and BIMSTEC with Sri Lanka as a whole,

deepen bilateral defence linkages; and, on the other hand, moderate, but convey, its own and the international community's displeasure at Sri Lanka's human rights record as well as the importance of devolving meaningful power for the Tamils.

2. Relations between India and Sri Lanka are "so ancient that they are lost in the mist of time." There is a great deal to be said about the cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. What more should be done to promote these activities to bring the two neighbours more closer?

As mentioned earlier, India needs to step up its economic, cultural and societal engagement with Sri Lanka. Specifically, notwithstanding the Sri Lankan government's allergy towards the idea of federalism, a greater engagement and dialogue between Indian and Sri Lankan academics, journalists, and think tankers (and intellectuals in general) on politics, nationalism, and democracy may in the medium to long term contribute to the evolution of ideas on how to better structure our respective polities and make governance more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

3. How far do you agree with the statement that Sri Lankan stability is critical to New Delhi's Indian Ocean ambitions?

I completely disagree with that statement. An unstable and even antagonistic Sri Lanka would hardly have any capability to limit India's naval ambitions. Even if Sri Lanka were to ally with an external power, say China which is making its presence felt in the Indian Ocean, it cannot escape the reality of geography both in terms of its own close location adjacent to Indian shores as well as the distance up to which China would have to project power and the shackles China will have to break through in the East and South China Seas before coming to Sri Lanka's rescue.

4. What role SAARC could play in promoting India - Sri Lanka relations?

The role of SAARC in promoting India-Sri Lanka relations lies in the deepening of regionalism and regional economic cooperation. And that has been on the right track for some years now.

5. Only Tamil Nadu has a disagreement with Sri Lankans, while the rest of the country supports the bilateral trade and economic relations with Sri Lanka. Regional parties have their own

compulsions. Their demands and protests are intended to pander to their vote banks. While the Centre needs to keep in mind the rationale (and underlying sentiment) of these demands when formulating policy, it shouldn't allow regional parties to dictate diplomatic engagements. Do you agree?

Firstly, it is incorrect to say that only Tamil Nadu has a disagreement with Sri Lanka on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue. Every individual of a liberal disposition, irrespective of the state s/he belongs to, would advocate that Colombo satisfy the genuine political aspirations of Sri Lankan Tamils by devolving reasonable powers to them within a united Sri Lanka, especially now that the threat of LTTE terrorism has been removed. In fact, some of the advocates of India adopting a tough position on Sri Lanka's human rights record are not Tamils, including Justice Rajinder Sachar, Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri and my colleague Dr. Smruti Pattanaik. See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). The position of successive Indian governments has also been to convince Colombo of the advantages of devolving power to Sri Lanka's Tamils; that was the purpose behind the despatch of the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the constitutional changes (13th Amendment) that India convinced the Sri Lankan government to effect; and that is the purpose behind India continuing to advocate a solution revolving around the 13th Amendment and indeed 13th Amendment Plus.

Secondly, democracy gives expression to the collective will of the people. And political parties have no choice but to listen to the voice of the people; in other words 'pander to their vote banks'. And this is not limited to India. Every democracy's foreign policy is affected to varying degrees by what its people as a whole or significant sections of them feel on a particular issue. A good instance is the role of the Israeli lobby in the United States, about which a rather blunt essay was written by two of America's leading professors of International Relations (Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer).

Finally, India's central governments have not had for the last two decades the luxury of ignoring the foreign policy views of regional parties upon whom they depend for their very survival. It appears that this situation may not change in the foreseeable future. Be that as it may, we should not forget the fact that India's involvement in Sri Lankan affairs began during the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi, at a time when the central government had a majority in Parliament and did not depend on the support of Tamil Nadu political parties. The Rajiv Gandhi government went several steps further in terms of its involvement in Sri

Lankan affairs, although it enjoyed a brute majority in Parliament. What this indicates is the fact that India's involvement in Sri Lankan affairs is not simply dictated by sentiment in Tamil Nadu alone but is also a function of other national security and foreign policy calculations.

6. Why the long-standing dispute between India and Sri Lanka over fishers crossing maritime boundaries remains unresolved?

Fishermen crossing maritime boundaries in search of a better catch is a common phenomenon across the world. Fishing grounds are rich on the Sri Lankan side of the maritime boundary, whereas they have become depleted on the Indian side. As a result, Indian fishermen are naturally tempted to cross the maritime boundary into Sri Lankan waters. Further contributing to this tendency was Colombo's October 2008 assurance that Indian fishermen would not be fired upon, a concession granted in return for Indian support during the last stages of the civil war. Sri Lanka has now revoked this concession; hence the increase in the number of incidents of arrest and firing upon Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy.

7. "India is our relation, others are our friends." said Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa. It is also said relations with India and China are "not a zero sum game" and Colombo's expanding relations with China are not in any way a "contradiction" to that. Is playing cheeky with two huge regional powers a sensible strategy for an island nation like Sri Lanka?

As mentioned earlier, there are serious limitations to what Sri Lanka can derive from its dalliance with China and ultimately geography and the huge power differential between India and Sri Lanka will trump all other factors. Be that as it may, all that Colombo is trying to achieve is a degree of diplomatic elbow room to deflect Indian pressure on the Tamil issue. Further, policy has to be made and geared towards the current situation, not driven by fears about what might happen 10 or 20 years later. In the meantime, the situation can be fundamentally transformed if India's current carrot and sticks approach were to be firmly implemented.

8. Do you agree with the view that all three parties-China, India and Sri Lanka have overplayed their hands? China overplayed the Sri Lanka card and did so too soon to the point that it now faces being cornered, supporting a country that can provide it no tangible benefits in the foreseeable future. Sri Lanka in its attempt to thwart Indian support for Tamil rights overplayed the China card and

demanded too much from India. India overplayed the China threat and has now been forced into a humiliating retreat by small regional parties within India's polity.

I don't see any of the three parties overplaying their hands as far as their trilateral relationship is concerned. China is a cautious power and it has a lot to be cautious about. It has to overcome enormous challenges in its North East Asian and South East Asian peripheries before it can begin to engage in serious power projection into the Indian Ocean. While India is indeed awakening to the reality of China's growing power, the international situation is still in a state of flux. Cooperation and competition continue to co-exist both in the India-China bilateral context as well as in China's relationships with all major Asian and Asia-Pacific powers. And for its part, Sri Lanka is well aware of its own limitations and of the pangs created by its proximity to India (to borrow Professor Muni's characterisation of the relationship), and of the limits of China's capability and motivation to offer complete support and protection. In sum, the international environment has not yet reached a stage where any set of bilateral or trilateral relationships assumes a zero sum character.

9. The Sri Lankan reconciliation process is under criticism due to its slow pace. The international community was assured of SL President Mahinda Rajapaksa's promise of political reforms and proper engagement of Tamils in the larger reconciliation process. However, after more than four years of the war, most of the Tamils in the Northern Province feel betrayed. How should India and the international community respond to these latest developments?

India needs to play a key role in moderating but at the same time channelling international outrage over the lack of forward movement in Sri Lanka's political reforms and reconciliation process at large. The two successive Indian votes against Sri Lanka and possibly a third as well in coming weeks needs to be seen in the correct perspective, namely, New Delhi's attempt to send a clear message to Colombo on the importance of moving forward and not engaging in unnecessary triumphalism. I do not accept the contention that New Delhi was forced to vote against Colombo at the UN Human Rights Council because of domestic political pressure from Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu factor is over-rated and a convenient scape goat to deflect attention from the real issue, namely, the lack of forward movement on political reforms and reconciliation. Equally worrying is the general slide in Sri Lanka's democratic vibrancy, what with abductions and disappearances of intellectuals and the muzzling of

the opposition which is already in a state of disrepair. New Delhi needs to stand up for its convictions and not seek shelter behind the skirts of federalism. Apart from goading the Sri Lankan government into moving towards political reforms and reconciliation, New Delhi must also step up its efforts to provide a boost for democratic forces in Sri Lanka by engaging with that country's opposition parties as well as with all those despairing of that country's slide away from democracy.

10. A recent report presented by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) claimed that Sri Lankan army committed 'vast majority' of the crimes during the last phase of the Eelam War in May 2009. The startling revelations have again put a question mark on the Sri Lankan government's ability to provide justice to victims of the war. The government is still in a mode of denial and disapproves any report claiming human rights violations. In the line of question is its own institution of Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). How far do you feel concerned on alleged human rights violations against Tamils of the island?

Excesses do happen in the course of a conflict and especially during the course of intense civil wars as occurred in Sri Lanka. If the Sri Lankan Army committed excesses, so did the LTTE during the course of its 25-year long terrorist campaign. The best way to move forward now is not to harp on who did what to whom during the civil war or to compare and contrast the intensity of massacres and the number of people killed by either side. Instead, reconciliation is the optimum way forward. In this regard, the Sri Lankan government did indeed take the right step of appointing the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission. What it needs to do now is gather up the will and the wisdom to implement the recommendations of this Commission. India and the international community need to evolve a carrot and stick policy to continuously nudge the Sri Lankan government towards this direction.

(These responses were made on 12 March 2014).

(4) Dr. Sandra Destradi

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

sandra.destradi@giga-hamburg.de

Sandra Destradi is a research fellow at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies / Institute of Asian Studies in Hamburg. Among her current research