

The issue of de-militarisation of Northern Province of Sri Lanka

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In a bilateral interaction at the recent BIMSTEC Summit in Myanmar, India's prime minister is reported to have told Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapakse on March 4, to think about demilitarizing Sri Lanka's northern province. As a posture, demilitarization may be alright for India but in real terms this may be difficult to achieve. A nation which had to endure enormous sacrifice and destruction to overcome the secessionist threat of the LTTE over nearly two decades cannot conceivably concede substantively. Moreover, within the ambit of Sri Lanka's Constitution, demilitarization may not be a feasible proposition, if it entails withdrawal of the defence establishment, either operational mobile elements or static garrisons from the northern province. From Sri Lanka's standpoint, its defence secretary is said to have opined that deployment of its military and acquisition of armaments were the prerogative of the government.

However, if the case for demilitarization rests on achieving a significant reduction in force strength of the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) in the Northern Province, which is reported to be currently about 150,000, then it is welcome. There is also no apparent reason to deploy the SLA in the north when there hardly has been any covert insurgent activity or overt armed action by any Tamil group since the end of the war in 2009. Furthermore, activities like the SLA taking control of agricultural land and denying the livelihood of the traditional Tamil owners from tilling as also usurping private civic lands for use by the SLA for their comfort like golf courses and residential buildings, etc have to stop. Going by media reports, more than 6000 acres of land belonging to the Tamil people before 2009 have subsequently been taken over by the Sri Lankan defence forces.

Some of the fundamental requirements are: the SLA should be confined to their barracks; further expansion of land area in possession of the SLA and their sister services' garrisons should not take place; surrender of land usurped by the armed forces (except the police) under emergency or special powers of the State to the provincial civil administration effected while allowing them to consolidate or localise their garrisons without visibly augmenting them and, a process of withdrawal of the SLA from agricultural and commercial activities on land taken over beyond the limits of the garrisons, after 2009, initiated.

Further, Rajapakse's government should not delay launching of such an action plan. For effectiveness, the implementation plan should have a consensus-based monitoring

mechanism with either the northern province Chief Minister or one of the Cabinet Ministers and one of the SLG Ministers. Such a measure would work towards instilling confidence in the local Tamil population, enable the provincial administration to assert its role in their provincial domain within the Constitution and also indicate to the international community that the government is serious on justice, demilitarization and resumption of livelihoods in the affected area (these are some of the cardinal points indicated in the latest Resolution introduced in the Human Rights Committee at Geneva).

De-militarisation per se is a sensitive issue for any country. Sri Lanka cannot be an exception, particularly in the backdrop of its past history and present context. However, it is of essence that the Sri Lanka armed forces' role vis-à-vis the provincial administrations or even in the larger island-nation context be re-defined. As a consequence of the Ealam wars and other developments, for example induction of ex-defence forces' officers like General Fonseka in politics, it may not be inappropriate to claim that the military's influence in Sri Lanka's national affairs have increased. This is quite clearly seen in the northern province.

In India, in contrast, there is the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) manned by both military and civilian personnel. It functions under India's Army Act for disciplinary control but is fully under the civilian administrative authority of the Ministry of Defence and the Border Roads Development Board. Sri Lanka could develop a similar framework for its northern province, limited to involvement in infrastructural activities like road-building, bridge construction, etc. Such a role for the huge military establishment presently in the northern province, may be viewed positively. The idea is to engage the SLA in project activities and relocate the army throughout the country and not be exclusively entrenched in the north. Maintenance of assets created may be funded and executed through the provincial administration.

While high-level interactions between India and Sri Lanka may continue, this is perhaps not the most propitious time for India, with its national elections around the corner, to press for de-militarisation of the northern province. The de-militarisation issue invariably is an emotive one in Tamil Nadu, with electoral ramifications. India's approach may be to achieve some outcome as stated above, through bilateral administrative and diplomatic efforts, in a manner that the entire process appears to be driven under the aegis of the Sri Lankan government.

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