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(This is an extract of answers to questions raised by webmedia in E-mail interview given to Confluence, a London Based Magazine.)

Q1. India has blown hot and cold over the Sri Lankan national question over the past several decades. Now there is 13A and the elections for a Northern Provincial government looming. Do you see the Manmohan government acting positive and decisively in this context?

There are two narratives on India's stand on the Sri Lankan national question. One is India as a regional power which would like to maintain a strategically useful and friendly relationship with Sri Lanka and the other, a national narrative based upon the traditional linkages between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka Tamils. The "hot and cold" relationship as you call it is due to the priorities of which narrative overtakes policy making at a specific time of criticality.

India had been trying to strike a balance between the two narratives. The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord 1987 was a product of this recipe. And it had all the makings of satisfying neither the regional strategic needs nor the local Tamil aspirations. It was in a way built into fail because it had so many loopholes for politicians on both sides to wriggle out of their commitment. The 13A as a product of this Accord is there with a lot of short comings. But it is at least recognition of the need for equitable justice to minorities. (I am not a great votary of the 13A; it needs to be reworked in the present climate when LTTE guns have been silenced. See my latest SAAG update on 13A uploaded yesterday.)

When Rajapaksa came to power and promised devolution and then waged Eelam war and sought Indian acquiescence, it was the regional narrative that dictated the policy. But when he failed to save the face of New Delhi by going back on his promises, New Delhi's inability to

meet the political demands in Tamil Nadu on the issue brought on the national narrative to the fore. With the elections looming for Indian parliament end 2013-14, the ruling Congress coalition facing multiple hazards to win the next election, national narrative is likely to get shriller unless Rajapaksa (in the most unlikely event) of doing a sleight of hand and gets Tamils back in political mainstream.

In international relations acting positively and decisively as you term it comes perhaps on the last stage before slapping sanctions or going to war. Indian foreign policy moves like the proverbial Indian elephant – at its own pace – and its large political body takes a long time to get decisive action going. Keeping this as well as the existing antagonistic relationship between the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and New Delhi in view, I do not expect a dramatic breakthrough in the near future. Ms Jayalalithaa's partisan approach to Sri Lanka national question limits her capability to rally India to act positively and equitably to bring about a useful solution.

After all, the days of Operation Poomalai that sent IAF aircraft to drop food supplies to beleaguered Jaffna are over. No country – not even the so called super power the U.S. - can get away with it unless it has a level of acceptance internationally. India usually does not make such multilateral moves in its neighbourhood unless it is under the UN aegis.

Q2. How do you see CHOGM playing a role in the present predicament at its September meeting in Sri Lanka? Canada has dropped out while David Cameron has said he will attend and yet give a terse message. South Africa is also likely to follow in the same vein. Others including Australia may toe a different line. How do you see a man accused as a war criminal functioning as the Head of the Commonwealth in the next two years?

The CHOGM undoubtedly puts India in a dilemma of Shakespearean proportions. Here also we see the national and regional narratives making their play to pull Indian decision making in opposite directions.

Tamil Nadu political parties, including the Congress, have asked for boycotting the CHOGM in protest against Sri Lanka's conduct and lack of accountability. India does not take such drastic decisions. I don't think present leadership in New Delhi would take such a step which could damage the strained India-Sri Lanka relationship irreparably (already soured by Indian vote at UNHCR) as Mahinda Rajapaksa who would be ascending to CHOGM chair could take it as a personal affront.

But New Delhi is definitely not happy with his broken promises and prevarication which have politically embarrassed Indian national leadership. And it will be paying a price for it in coalition politics. New Delhi will be factoring these aspects while considering Tamil Nadu's political pressures.

If political compulsions and pressures from Chennai are insurmountable then New Delhi might downgrade the level of participation to Minister of External Affairs.

On the other hand, India at the strategic level would like to leverage its attendance to get what it wants from Sri Lanka. In the present context it might be limited only to ensure the Northern Province elections go through without amending 13A. Already Sri Lanka has indicated that it would be the game plan. It would be logical to deduce this did not come from a change of heart in Sri Lanka but as a sop to India. While it might satisfy North Block in New Delhi it is unlikely to be accepted in Tamil Nadu. So presumably India could apply more pressure on Mahinda – form and content of this remains in the realm of speculation – in the coming weeks.

Personally, I feel India should participate in CHOGM – at whatever level it wants – so that Rajapaksa's double speak is laid bare to all the leaders on the sidelines of the conference or interspersed amidst generalities that pass for CHOGM declaration. Perhaps David Cameron is already working on such a thing and India can ginger it up a bit to send a strong medicine to Rajapaksa.

Boycott is a one shot affair suited to Canadian vote banks but not India as it has umbilical relations with Sri Lanka. India has to take the narrative further, not chop it.

Q3. Rajapakse has cultivated China assiduously and there is even a defence agreement for the supply of arms and training. How do you view China's role in this context?

Yes Chinese are in a big way, digging their heels in Sri Lanka in many sectors. This is what they are doing in Nepal, where they are funding Chinese language teaching. And Bangladesh is in line for it. Pakistan is a strong strategic ally just as Myanmar is. The entire Indian neighbourhood is coming under high profile Chinese presence in infrastructure, telecom, tourism, power generation, and consumer goods sectors.

But it should not be forgotten that in India also Chinese influence in the same business sectors, barring Chinese tourism, is going up. Already Indian companies are availing RMB loans. India-China trade is poised to hit \$ 100 billion in 2015. Would Chinese want to endanger this by stepping on India's corns with a confrontational profile in Sri Lanka? I don't think so. They will be more nuanced and subtle.

This does not minimise the strategic risk India will be facing with incremental Chinese influence. It does not matter whether it is defence training or arms supply. India surpasses all countries put together in training Sri Lankan troops. India does not supply arms to Sri Lanka in any case. China cannot match India except in select areas. And there is a military culture that has to have compatibility which India and Sri Lanka enjoy much more than China could aspire. But they could use Sri Lanka as a springboard for snooping on Indian communication, manage intelligence network, embed agents and practise all the arts and crafts of intelligence because India and Sri Lanka are so close. India has no option but to counter them using their own assets in Sri Lanka.

But the real danger is in China influencing Sri Lankan policy decisions that could adversely affect India in trade, transit, furthering India-Sri

Lanka economic links. Already there are some indications that some attempts are being made. With Sri Lanka so close by land and sea in times of war which I do not visualise, China's ever-growing profile would be a real threat. The merchant marine assets could be used for R and R and supply; telecom satellites could eavesdrop on India. India should factor it in its big picture of regional strategy and in shaping its China policy and Sri Lanka policy because this is what Big Game is all about. This will be more so when Chinese naval profile increases its potential as a threat in Indian Ocean in next ten years. I am sure someone is already doing it or planning to do it [in their reckoning] in North and South Blocks, political leaders willing.

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