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Guest column by Kumar David

It makes no sense for India to pussyfoot in the way it has been doing for the last five years.

Prime Minister Singh's congenital indecisiveness has cost dear on the local scene and Congress is staring into the jaws of electoral defeat. There is something called induction in mathematics, a political version of which would say: If the Indian government could land itself in such a gigantic mess in local affairs, the expectation is that the foreign affairs side must be worse. The facts bear out this pessimism.

It is simply not acceptable that India is not a cosponsor of a resolution on Lanka at the UNHRC in Geneva. Observe that I carefully use the indefinite article 'a' not the definite article 'the', to make it clear that India need not be a passive cosponsor of a US resolution, but rather it should be an active leader in crafting a resolution together with the US and possibly South Africa which reflects its positive inputs. It is unsurprising that big issues anywhere in the world land on some desk in the White House or the State Department, and the US gets involved. If it does not, some party will drag it in. These are the travails of being sole global superpower. India is the regional power on this side of Asia – that is west of Indo China and east of Iran. Its failure to play a positive and leading role in the Lankan imbroglio is partly why the dispute is dragging on.

The regional laggard

Delhi's responses are reactive, not proactive. Its leadership failures, and stop-go responses to the flavour of the month in Tamil Nadu, are examples of its reactive style. If Delhi had a positive policy stance Tamil Nadu would not have been able to steal the thunder. The reason provincial elections were held in the Northern Province of Lanka, 25 years after the 13-th amendment was enacted, was pressure connected with CHOGM; Canada's boycott, British threats and of course Indian pressure too. But a firmer Indian stance during the last quarter century

would have got elections quicker and there would be more in the devolution basket by now.

The Northern Provincial Administration and Chief Minister CV Wigneswaran have been emasculated by the Colombo government. For historical reasons this is not exclusively a sovereign matter of no concern to India. There are some who say that India is working behind the scenes; well it must be pretty timid to judge by the ineffectiveness of outcomes. Of course it is absurd for us Lankans to blame India, or for that matter anyone else, for the calamitous situation we are in, I will not dispute this for a moment. But having granted this, I question India's role and ask if it has shown initiative and leadership skills commensurate with its position as a regional power.

The answer is very obviously no! Just take the stark fact that the resolution on Sri Lanka at the UNHRC is being moved by the United States. India far from being one of the prime movers and crafters of the resolution is fence sitting. In the end it will, very likely, vote in favour but it would like to give the impression that it was dragged unwillingly, kicking and screaming like a prisoner to execution. Yes this is what India looks like, and worse still, this is what it wants to look like. I know the mandarins in Delhi will not take any notice what folks like me write; perhaps nobody in the bureaucracy even bothers to read it. But for the record and for the sake of those who do read, the right approach must be stated. That is, India must sit with the US and draw up the resolution together; they must cosponsor the resolution. It will not be the same in content as the current US draft; yes fine, that's just the point.

A resolution that comes out such a process will have enormous currency and impact on all sections of society and government in Sri Lanka. A resolution to which India is committed, not something for which it raises its hand because it could not do otherwise, is a very different story. The Rajapakses, the SLFP, UNP and Muslim Congress will have to take it on board. The TNA will be bound by it. The JHU and JVP of course will go to town screaming about Indian expansionism. If you want to please everybody you will not be able to do anything. The solution is good judgement, active intervention and leadership; let the dogs bark, the caravan moves on.

Indian and American game plans

What are India's objectives in this matter in a broad sense? They are different from the objectives of the Americans. The latter consist of the following to different degrees. First, but this is a small matter, American public and Congressional opinion about justice and human rights has to be assuaged. A second factor, again of small importance, is the pressure of the Tamil diaspora in Britain and Canada. Third, the Americas like Delhi are fed up with Colombo's insolence and untruths and may want teach the upstarts a lesson, but it is unlikely that foreign policy decisions of world powers are made in response to pique.

A fourth more substantial reason is the strategic factor. Lanka's location in the Indian Ocean, sea routes, proximity to India and a great and growing Chinese strategic and economic threat. But there is no Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean, nor will there be for another quarter century; China does not have a blue water fleet. Nor will the UNHRC fracas help in this respect; it is more likely to push Colombo further into Chinese arms. On the economic side too Lanka is not a big factor in China's great global outreach; Africa, Central Asia and South America matter much more.

This brings me to my hypothesis, which includes all of the above but only as partial factors. A more general overarching perspective is as follows. The Americans are putting in motion a process of regime change which will deliver results some years down the road. But why does the US want regime change? They reckon the Rajapakse Regime is headed for instability in the coming years; rapport with the North is deteriorating and there is no political solution in sight, Muslims have been alienated, and the relationship with India may deteriorate precipitately after Indian elections. Most seriously, the political scene in the south shows big fault lines and the current round of elections may be the last time the government can play the Sinhala-Buddhist card; that cock may not live to fight yet another day. Since every global crisis ends on the American plate, for a complex of reasons to do with America's global position, maybe Washington wants to nip this one in the bud.

The Indian game plan for Lanka, as far as I judge, should be more limited and clear cut. Full and real implementation of the 13-th Amendment, real devolution, a healthy and functioning Northern Provincial Administration and a stable political solution for the Tamil question. If a political settlement comes through, the demand for war-crimes prosecution is likely to reduce to truth and reconciliation. A working Northern Provincial Administration will pacify Tamil Nadu – Wigneswaran and TNA can visit and hold seminars – and the anger on war crimes may subside sufficiently to settle for a Truth and Reconciliation mechanism instead an Investigative Tribunal. India as a cosponsor could have taken a leading role in getting a political settlement without which these options are closed. True the UNHRC is concerned about human rights, political solutions are not on its agenda, but the world is interconnected.

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