Sri Lanka: Time to shake up Sri Lanka’s “business as usual” with India - Update No. 247

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 07/17/2014 - 10:58

Note No.  721    Dated 17-Jul-2014

By Col. R. Hariharan

(This article contains excerpts from a media interview given by the author on August 16, 2014.)

Time has come for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take a relook at Sri Lanka affairs under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. He has continued for too long to bash on regardless of his unkept promises to India on implementing the 13th Constitutional Amendment in full. It was to be part of the resumption of the stalled political dialogue process with Tamil leaders which he promised to undertake.

Modi’s elevation as Prime Minister initially caused some concern to Rajapaksa as the BJP electoral partners in Tamil Nadu were well known for their strong anti-Rajapa and decidedly pro-Tamil separatist stand. But seeing the dynamic new Indian prime minister’s keenness to build better relations with India’s neighbours, Rajapaksa seems to have decided that it would be business as usual for Sri Lanka while dealing with India.

Just one example will suffice to explain Rajapaksa’s intransigent attitude to the dialogue process with Tamil leaders. Recently, the President had a wonderful opportunity to build bridges with Tamil polity when the 5-year tenure of Northern Province Governor Chandrasiri ended. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which is in power in the Province had for long been demanding replacing Chandrasiri a former General, with an experienced and well respected civilian, for which there is no dearth in Sri Lanka. The TNA felt such a move would provide a better equation in dealing with Colombo as the population was recovering from post war trauma. The President could have acceded to their request now without any loss of face for anyone (except probably the President’s brother Gotabaya who has a different view on the subject)
by appointing a civilian as the governor for Northern Province. Such a gesture would have helped to create good will not only among Tamils but also among large sections of Sri Lanka civil society who feel President Rajapaksa has not done enough to bringing the Tamils back into national mainstream and put an end to ethnic confrontation.

But the President chose to reappoint the outgoing Governor Chandrasiri for yet another term in the same job. It was a gesture in articulating the President’s power; the announcement came like a slap in the face of the Dr Wigneswaran, the TNA chief minister of the Province, because he had been demanding Chandrasiri’s replacement from day one in office. With it Rajapaksa has sent a clear signal to Tamils that there would be no rapprochement with them except on his terms.

This comes as no surprise if we see the evolution of Sri Lanka’s policy in the last five post war years. Its core contents appear to be

1. Marginalise India’s role on behalf of the Tamil constituency; of course, on all other aspects Colombo welcomes India’s initiatives in trade, defence, and other matters, naturally on terms favourable to Sri Lanka.
2. International NGOs should lay off Sri Lanka on issues like war crimes, human rights, governance, minority rights and rule of law. To be ‘fair’ to small countries they should go after big powers which seem to get away with much bigger crimes. Already Ministry of Defence which seems to have hand in the policy making pie, has already proposed restrictions on NGOs access to public media. Of course, the NGOs are welcome to associate with government-sponsored programmes to improve the well being of the people.
3. International bodies like the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) are manipulated by Western powers and the US. So Sri Lanka should not facilitate any role for them in its internal affairs (forget the UN conventions say because everyone flouts them). While Sri Lanka cannot stop their “meddling,” it can network with like-minded countries (eg., Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea etc) and make a lot of noise about the intrusive nature of UN commissions’ work because it echoes the view of many nations.
4. The Tamil issue has been solved with the elimination of Prabhakaran and the Tamil Tigers. But Sri Lanka would attend to Tamil grievances, if any, on its own terms without any external intervention. And the 13th constitutional amendment was created to satisfy India and at best it is a benevolent gesture to Tamils. Tamils should be happy with its present form of incomplete implementation.
5. The army has an important role to play in keeping the Northern and Eastern provinces “sanitized” to prevent any ‘resurrection’ of Tamil terrorism abetted by Tamil Diaspora and their pals in TNA and the remnants of LTTE abroad (and in Tamil Nadu). So regardless of what the government says, the army will continue to keep a watch on the activity of Tamils everywhere including the North and East. As it is in the interest of national security, army’s intrusive role, if any, has to be tolerated by civilians and condoned by the government. As a corollary the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) would continue to be in force.

As far as India’s role on Tamils in Sri Lanka is concerned, in a nutshell, Rajapaksa is telling India “forget about full implementation of 13th Amendment, or its Plus version I spoke about. It is for TNA to negotiate what it wants because basically it is our internal issue.”

Did Modi’s cordial meeting with Rajapaksa and the absence of any representative from his Tamil Nadu political partners in the cabinet
influence Rajapaksa’s attitude? It is time to shake up Colombo’s “business as usual” mindset at least a wee bit.

From this point of view I welcome the initiative taken by Civil Society Coalition for Justice and Peace delegation from Tamil Nadu which met with the Minister of External Affairs Mrs Sushma Swaraj to articulate the concerns of Tamils. The delegation led by the UPA coalition partner PMK’s leader Anbumani included civil society activist and former IAS officer MG Devasahyam, former Dharmapuri MP R Senthil and advocate R Balu. This is a welcome move because civil society has to be involved in articulating Tamil Nadu’s concerns on Sri Lanka Tamil issue, which has been used for too long by political parties only to score political brownie points.

I do not agree with the delegation’s view that China, Pakistan, and Burma were ganging up with Sri Lanka against India because it is too simplistic. India’s Sri Lanka policy cannot be changed overnight because it is not exclusively Tamil-centric but includes other issues of national interest like trade, maritime and security concerns as well.

But I fully agree with them on two other points they made:

- India should prevail upon Rajapaksa for a course correction in keeping with his promises to India on resuming the political process with the Tamil representatives.
- Rajapaksa should be made to address concerns of India and international community on Sri Lanka’s accountability for alleged human rights violations and war crimes articulated in the UNHRC resolutions.

As a first step in this process, India can tell Sri Lanka that it would reconsider its stand on the UN resolution adopted last March when it comes for review in the next UNHRC meeting.

In March 2014 India had abstained from voting for the resolution because it considered operative paragraph 10 calling for sending an international investigation team to Sri Lanka as intrusive. But Sri Lanka should be an exception to this because Rajapaksa has not fulfilled his promises to India. And Rajapaksa will not realise it unless India takes a hard stand on this count.

Lastly, I agree with the delegation on the need for a special officer at the MEA to handle Sri Lanka. I wrote on this issue in an article the Indian Foreign Affairs Journal April-June 2012 issue; “India-Sri Lanka relations need a more integrated political-diplomatic-strategic-trade strategy evolved by national leadership. The resources at the Ministry of External Affairs are totally inadequate to execute such a strategy, even if it is devised. Perhaps creating a special task force with its element in Chennai would be the answer. Then only India can show Sri Lanka that it is serious about strengthening its relationship as equal partner.” I stand by it.

(Col Hariharan is a retired MI officer who served as the head of intelligence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 90. E-mail: colhari@yahoo.com [1] Blogs: http://col.hariharan.info [2] & http://hanharansintblog.blogspot.in [3])

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