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By Col. R. Hariharan

[Answers to questions raised by an international news agency on the subject in an e-mail interview on Dec 23rd.]

Any narrative on Sri Lanka would be incomplete if India's overwhelming influence in Sri Lanka is not considered. It comes from India's huge geographic size, economic strength and global political influence from times immemorial.

After the British colonial power exited from South Asia, independent India's dominance gave rise to anxiety among sections of Sri Lankans, particularly among the Sinhala Buddhist majority who saw their country as Theravada Buddhism's last sanctuary.

The sense of anxiety gave way to a feeling of insecurity across Sri Lanka particularly after India's massive political and military intervention from 1987 to 90 to ensure the state redressed the grievances of Tamil minority population.

Though the Tamil minority question is still unresolved, Indian intervention had a positive, but cathartic effect to impart balance and realism to the largely unequal relationship between the two countries. During the last two decades both the countries have assiduously built a multi-faceted relationship.

Its hallmark is probably the close strategic coordination that exists today between them to address and repair their mutual concerns on national security issues.

Both of your questions on China have to be answered in this as the backdrop. The questions relate to the impact of China's increasing

presence and influence on Sri Lanka's Jan 2015 Presidential election and upon India's close strategic security relations with Sri Lanka and the region.

China factor

Q: A Sri Lankan ambassador to Cuba once called Sri Lanka a "natural aircraft carrier" for the Chinese. How likely is that scenario? If China were to establish a permanent naval presence in Sri Lanka, how would that impact regional politics?

Sri Lanka is the strategic gateway to India from

Indian Ocean just as India is the guarantor of Sri Lanka's freedom from external threat and invasion. At the same time their close geostrategic umbilical relationship makes both of them highly vulnerable to any external threat to either of them. The reality is if China's increasing presence in Sri Lanka affects India's strategic security, its fall out will be upon Sri Lanka as well.

So establishment of a permanent Chinese naval presence in Sri Lanka would dislocate the strategic balance in this region for two reasons. Naval power has become a key to China's power projection in Asia-Pacific region, particularly after PLA Navy modernisation has made rapid progress.

China is entering the South and Central Asia in a big way investing huge amounts in building the land and maritime infrastructure to resurrect the Silk Route to external world including Central and South Asia and what it calls the Maritime Silk road. Sri Lanka has an unrivalled pivotal position in the maritime route because it is midway on the sea lanes of communication from Europe to East Asia and Pacific.

Any Chinese strategic intrusion in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has to reckon with the naval power of India - "the largest and most capable Indian Ocean littoral" as retired Indian Vice Admiral AC Das puts it. In his words this gives India "serious interests in the Western Pacific [as well] through which half of its overseas trade moves."

While assessing Chinese naval threat, the twin weaknesses of PLA-N have to be considered. PLAN is yet to demonstrate its mastery of fleet operations particularly employing carrier borne forces. Despite its increasing number of ships and modernisation of command and control systems, can the present PLA-N match Indian navy's five decades of fleet and aircraft operational experience to dominate the Indian Ocean? This remains the moot question. Under such limitations, it would be reasonable to expect the PLA -N to do so around the last quarter of the coming decade. And India is in no mood to accept it lying.

All these are in the realm of speculation if it is considered in the emerging Asia-Pacific strategic logjam where Russia, China, India, Japan and the U.S. are locked in a complex game of power assertion. It involves not merely their military power, but also the economic and global

relationship clout as well.

So it would be realistic to conclude that China with its desire to expand its economic and strategic influence this region would rather have India as an ally, if not a partner, than as a foe. Both China and Sri Lanka have repeatedly averred that China's port infrastructure constructions in Sri Lanka relate to merchant marine facilities and not for naval operations.

At the same time, it would be prudent to remember they would tremendously increase opportunities for the Chinese intelligence to improve their snooping and electronic eaves dropping on India. They would also provide legitimate opportunities for Chinese war ships to operate in India's close proximity.

Q: What are Sri Lanka's best long-term options given all the financing and infrastructure that China has brought to the economy? Should it place its bets by aligning itself more closely with Beijing? Can it continue to play China and India off against each other?

The best option for Sri Lanka is to cultivate India to make productive use of the infrastructure built with expensive Chinese loans and project expertise. India has the power and potential to do so in Sri Lanka because its aid comes at one third the cost of Chinese loans. It can be encouraged to create joint enterprises with China so that they generate a lot of employment and make Sri Lanka a commercial capital in Asia.

Sri Lanka has adequate wisdom not to align itself totally with China which has a tendency to gobble up local joint ventures and create closed facilities outside the control of local government.

All nations play their diplomatic cards to get the maximum out of other countries; Sri Lanka has neither the size nor the strength to play off India and China against each other. Their agenda is much larger and Sri Lanka forms only one part of it; so I do not subscribe to the 'street smartness' of Sri Lanka playing any cards in the power game of giant Asian nations.

Q: Given regional concerns about China's growing assertiveness, are outsiders/ third-parties watching these Sri Lankan elections more than usual? (Or should they be?)

Of course, outsiders and third-parties are watching the Sri Lanka elections more than usual not merely because of their concerns about China which will have only peripheral impact. Under the leadership of President Rajapaksa Sri Lanka is rapidly slipping into authoritarian mode with Rajapaksa family gaining control of the reins of power. That is their concern.

Mahinda Rajapaksa gained unmatched national popularity after he masterminded the total destruction of Prabhakaran-led Tamil Tiger separatists who held the nation to ransom for three decades. This helped him gain a huge majority in parliament.

But he has used his national popularity after the war not to resolve the vexing Tamil issue but to strengthen his power base. In the process fundamental freedoms have been curtailed, dissent suppressed, critical media hounded and pillars of democratic governance like the judiciary have been subverted. Lawlessness has become all pervading.

While the President enjoys unfettered power, his brothers exercise control over the finances and the bloated armed forces. Last but not least, Tamil minority's unattended grievances have the seeds to germinate Tamil separatism all over again out of the ashes of the Tamil Tigers.

So the Western world - particularly the EU and the U.S. are concerned because Rajapaksa has used xenophobia to ward off even the UN demand for greater accountability for gross human rights violations and alleged war crimes committed under his watch. He has nurtured latent anti-American feelings among the right wing fringe for his political benefit.

Added to these concerns, India's worries have increased over Rajapaksa's studied indifference to implement his own promises to India to kick start the political process with Tamils.

Politically it reflects India's weakening ability to influence Sri Lanka. This should be of concern to Prime Minister Modi though he has managed to free the Indian government from the retrograde influence of Tamil Nadu politics which hobbled India's policy making for the last two decades. So, Sri Lanka Parliamentary election is of special interest to the international community. This is more so after Rajapaksa's own long term political aide Maithripala Sirisena walked out to emerge as the common opposition candidate to deny a third term for Rajapaksa.

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