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Guest Column by Kumar David

Indo-Lanka relations were in the doldrums throughout the Rajapaksa period; they have never been worse, not even during the JR Jayewardene period (1977-1989).

The factor that bedevilled the relationship in both periods was the Tamil question; furthermore one other issue each gave rise to disquiet during each of these two 'regencies'. During the first term of JR's presidency, Lanka's foreign policy swung alarmingly in a pro-US direction (JR is known as Yankee-Dickey) at a time when Indira Gandhi's Delhi was aligned with Moscow. More recently, Rajapaksa, light-fingered with Chinese project funds, treated Lanka as a grotto of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves legerdemain. The former story is well known and I will not comment further; the foreign policy implication of the latter is central to this essay. But I will devote a few paragraphs to a relevant background summary first.

The State in Sri Lanka from the mid-1970s onwards, a phase that may now be drawing to a close, was a Sinhala-Buddhist State. I do not use this as an epithet of denigration but as a theoretical definition. The Constitution, the composition of governments and cabinets, the mono ethnic military and politically servile police, the public service, the corporate sector, polarisation of social life and education, everything was dichotomous, ethnically divisive and oppositional. Demographics then ensured that the Sinhalese political elite took control of polity. Obviously in such circumstances the state transformed into an instrument of that community and the Tamils were alienated. In three sentences, if it is possible, this is what I have in mind when I speak of a Sinhala-Buddhist State.

The Tamil response was protest, civil disobedience, armed rebellion and eventually civil war after the horrendous 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. The deepest consciousness of Sinhala revanchism in Sri Lanka has been "this is the land of the Sinhala-Buddhists; the Tamils are only

tolerated”; recently Muslims too are treated as enemies by Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists. The Tamil psyche in the initial post-independence period was suspicion and cliquishness, in the civil war it fermented into secessionism, terrorism (in the beginning this was a response to state terrorism) and in the diaspora fratricidal struggle was marinated with rank communalism.

In such circumstances it was inevitable that India, with its massive Tamil community in the South, would be dragged into the dynamics. Sovereignty is bollocks, as the Ukraine-Russia tangle and Indian involvement in training and arming Tamil militants, the 1987 air-drop and the Indo-Lanka Accord prove. When the muddle within a country boils it pours over into the outer world. Some say India should not have intervened in or attempted to redress Tamil grievances in Lanka, others say it should have done more (at the UNHRC for example). Get real! If “fire burns and cauldron bubbles”, some will douse, others fan the flames. Lanka is squarely to blame for the overflow.

This piece is about resetting Indo-Lanka relations; what needs to be renewed and reset is the relationship between Delhi and the Sinhalese people. An indispensable precondition is sorting out the Tamil issue, but simultaneously Delhi’s thrust should now be mending its relationship with the Sinhalese community. This is core to resetting Indo-Lanka relations. Sinhalese fears going back two millennia will not disappear, not even in my grandchildren’s lifetime, but since subliminal Sinhalese fear of local Tamils is that they will be a conduit for Indian power, rapprochement between India and the Sinhalese will defuse anti-Tamil sentiment at home benefiting local Tamils.

Regional balances of power

Sibling rivalry is well known, conflict festers within families. For eighty-thousand of the last one-hundred thousand years the island and the subcontinent have been connected by a land bridge; for long periods humans strolled from one place to the other. The people of Lanka are but a variation on a sub-continental theme; research has established that “Jaffna Tamils” are genetically more closely allied to the Sinhalese than to South Indian Tamils. Our languages and scripts are versions of Indian counterparts, our culture and traditions allied. Mrs Bandaranaike summed it with sensitivity when in troubled times she wrote to her friend Mrs Gandhi of the nearness of our peoples and made touching reference to Gautama Siddhartha: “Your greatest son is the sun that shines in our land”. There is no escaping proximity; in fair weather and foul an ample nexus binds Lanka to the subcontinent.

However Indo-Lanka relations float on a sea of multilateral waves. The four significant theatres, in priority, are India, the West that is Britain and the US, China and the Islamic oil states; the rest can be lumped into an “also” category. I need say no more about Indian pole-position except to add that the subcontinent is our largest import provider, mainly food, and that a million Upcountry Tamils form another strong bond. The Islamic oil-states need an article on their own. A return to genuine all round non-alignment is what Lanka needs after the rootless drifting of the Jayewardene and Rajapaksa years; the Lankan bourgeoisie needs the resources and the markets of the West.

The West is not only an export market (over 50% of Lanka’s exports land in Europe and the US), nor only a source of investment capital and tourists. Something else is also vital; culture, education and language. Colonialism has left a legacy in the island no less strong than in India;

English is the link language and medium of elite and business communication. Overseas education and professional migration aim exclusively at the West. Lankan doctors do not brawl for Chinese 'green-cards', nor engineers line up outside the Russian Embassy for postings. Rabid Sinhala nationalists and old Maoist parents ask me to introduce their children to Anglophile colleges; never Beijing or Moscow! Lanka's ethos and head are firmly cemented in Anglophile directions.

Midsummer madness

China is a mighty rising power with deep pockets, it is on the way to becoming the world's largest economy with an unquenchable thirst for minerals and raw materials, Premier Li's downsizing of the growth rate to 7% notwithstanding. It has poured money into infrastructure in Lanka; much of it wasteful. The Mattala Airport in the wilds of Rajapaksa's electoral habitat Hambantota is a monument to insanity. Located in the middle of nowhere it literally does not attract plane or passenger for days. A full immigration and customs complement and technical personnel do what – play football in dirt fields and watch cricket on TV? Another example is the Hambantota port where no ship calls unless forced by government. Not even India's fabled licence-raj is quite so daft! Add to these Chinese funded mega projects the now stalled \$1.5 billion Colombo Harbour City.

China has also funded highways, road developments, a lotus shaped jamboree hall, a futile obelisk and a 900 MW power-station. Not everything is midsummer madness. Power is essential but an itinerary of breakdowns is worrisome. Highway building and road development are crucial but looting has been on a royal scale. An anti-corruption group examined the Chinese funded Southern and Katunayake highways and published an exposé saying they cost 5 to 7 times what they should. How can money evaporate on such a gigantic scale; these are not million but billion rupee projects? A fat slice is probably pocketed by the Chinese developer at source; a fatter slice no doubt flowed into overseas accounts of the highest echelons of the previous regime bypassing local banks. All the way down the supply chain, materials, equipment, labour suppliers and contractors were ruling party cronies whose mark up was robbery. Lanka is unfamiliar with grand larceny on this scale. (See also the Deputy Finance Minister's interview on: <http://www.dailymirror.lk/66403/we-will-get-an-answer-soon-enough> [1])

What has all this lamentation got to do with foreign policy? Aye that's the point; leaders wielding unchecked power enjoy mega-scale relationships with China that they cannot with any other loan provider. Control is lax and corruption at high financial and project levels widespread; crooked leaders in recipient countries can make deals with Chinese sources that would be unthinkable with Western or multilateral sources like the IMF, World Bank or ADB. This twist transforms pedestrian corruption into foreign policy. And mind you it is not China that is being robbed; it is Sri Lanka that is being looted. Why?

Most project financing is in loans that have to be repaid, not grants. Lanka's next generation has to bear the repayment and interest charges on looted funds; nor are they low-interest loans, the rates are commercial. The total project financing debt Lanka has incurred with China, leaving aside Colombo Harbour City (CHC), is probably a billion dollars. CHC too is now unravelling as another gigantic scam but

agreements have been signed and sealed and it is difficult for Lanka to renege; it is a topic deserving treatment on its own and beyond the scope of this piece.

In summary the point is that the pro-China tilt in foreign policy in the Rajapaksa era was not motivated by rational investment needs (some projects certainly were desirable) nor by Chinese strategic military objectives. No; in the mind of the regime the key was graft. [I do not believe China has an eye on naval or military pads in Sri Lanka; that is undoable and the Indo-American backlash will be relentless. The Chinese, wisely, do not want an Indian Ocean spat].

The sine qua non

Premier Modi's visit to Colombo and President Sirisena's to India signals reengagement. An important background item is the Lankan government's anti-corruption drive. Still half-hearted and under intense public criticism for failing to produce results, it has shone sufficient light on big time larceny in mega projects including Chinese financed ones. This engenders a favourable atmosphere for rebuilding Indo-Lanka relations.

This scenario, and better relations with the Tamils, is a not to be missed opportunity for Delhi and Colombo. So far Modi, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have shown good sense and adopted a gradualist approach. They recognise that damage must be reversed but the devil is in the details. There will be slips between cup and lip; the fishermen's tussle in the Palk Strait is a livelihood issue that has to be managed. Unfortunately Premier Modi and Northern Province Chief Minister Wigneswaran struck discordant notes regarding the 13-th Amendment. In an unrelated development Lankan Prime Minister called Wigneswaran a liar on Indian TV! All this histrionics aside **the sine qua non for good relations between India and Lanka is keeping Mahinda Rajapaksa out of power; if that fly gets in the ointment it will poison the whole recipe.**

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