

Chinese Defence Minister's visit to Sri Lanka: An Indian Perspective

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By Col. R. Hariharan

China's Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie's visited Sri Lanka for five days from August 29, 2012. The first-ever visit by a Chinese Defence Minister to Sri Lanka with an entourage of 23 members indicates the ever increasing Chinese interest in the island nation.

The defence minister called upon President Rajapaksa and met with the Secretary of Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa. He also visited the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) and the Defence Service College (DSC) – a national school established for children of defence services and police personnel. Even there the defence minister's visit was limited to interaction with military personnel only. There was no press meet organised for the visiting delegation.

Evidently there was a conscious effort to keep the visit at a low key. It would be charitable to think that this was done as both sides were mindful of India's sensitivities to Chinese overtures in Sri Lanka. But it would probably accurate to say that the Chinese defence minister did not want the Colombo visit to be overplayed as New Delhi was his next stop.

General Liang's meeting with the President was only briefly reported in official release with traditional averment to peace and friendship between the two countries. On the Chinese visitor's meeting with Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka defence ministry said Sri Lanka and China had sought to strengthen their military ties. The Chinese press release was a little more detailed. It quoted General Liang as saying that political trust between the two countries had deepened with the rapid expansion of exchanges and cooperation in various fields. He expressed the hope that the two sides would continue to work hard to maintain the close and friendly relations and strengthen

exchanges and cooperation in the field of non- traditional security and improve the ability to respond to crisis together, so as contribute to regional peace, stability and development (emphasis added).

Presumably the reference to non-traditional security and responding to crisis together was related to international counter-terrorism cooperation that China had been promoting for some time. This was mooted in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and joint exercises have been carried out. Probably China would like to promote similar joint efforts with South Asian nations. This is evidenced by the Chinese military participation in the Sri Lanka joint services exercise “Cormorant III” from September 10 to 25 in Eastern Vakarai in Eastern Province. In this exercise along with Sri Lanka troops, Chinese troops would be participating side by side with military personnel from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Maldives.

India is not participating in the exercise. However, Indian observers will be attending the exercise. It will be interesting to watch how China progresses this nascent foray of “joint training” with South Asian countries. India’s response to this initiative will be equally interesting as during his Indian visit later, the Chinese defence minister had spoken of resuming military cooperation and exercises with India which were disrupted for a while.

According to Sri Lankan defence website about 2000 troops from the three services will be participating in the exercise. The exercise will include carrying out raids on boat yards, amphibious landings, taking of high value targets, reconnaissance and surveillance of targets, airborne and seaborne operations, path-finding missions, ambushes, search operations, counter terrorist actions and hostage rescue mission etc. Honing of Sri Lankan army’s joint operational skills with the air force and navy in counter terrorism operations appears to be the main objective of the exercise.

Apparently, the Sri Lankan armed forces are getting ready to face a potential threat of LTTE remnants overseas making a foray into Sri Lanka at a future date. Though such a contingency might appear remote at present, Sri Lankan armed forces are training themselves to be ready for such security situations. This is in keeping with training practices of national armies everywhere and drawing alarming conclusion of imminent extremist threat to Sri Lanka would be incorrect.

However, more relevant from Indian point of view is, in future Sri Lanka will have the option of seeking Chinese military assistance in such an eventuality. This gives a totally different dimension to the growing military cooperation between the two countries. Probably, Sri Lanka has a similar understanding already with India. Despite such an understanding, China’s active military cooperation if and when it comes through in Sri Lanka, literally in India’s ‘backyard’, would complicate India’s security calculus.

Any India-China military stand-off in the future would be a testing time for Sri Lanka as has excellent defence understanding and cooperation with India. In this context, Sri Lanka Prime Minister DK Jayaratne remark when Chinese Vice-Premier Zhang Dejiang visited Sri Lanka in June 2010 is interesting. He said Sri Lanka would unswervingly support China on issues of core interest. China went to war with India in

1962 as they consider security of national borders as a core issue. Considering Sri Lanka's past conduct in 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars, and economic compulsions facing the country now, in any future India-China confrontation also Sri Lanka is likely to adopt a neutral stance.

At the macro level, Chinese desire for greater security tie ups with Sri Lanka and other South Asian nations is presumably in response to increasing American strategic security profile in Asia-Pacific. Indian security planners would do well to contextualise these developments in the power play between China and the U.S. Such tie ups would come in handy as and when PLA Navy increases its muscle power in the next five years and enlarges its presence in Indian Ocean region to safeguard China's security interests which are becoming global.

However, presumably to allay suspicion among South Asian nations of China's increasing interest in the region, General Liang emphasised China's peaceful intent in his speech at the DSCSC. He focused on peaceful development as essential component of China's defence policy presumably to allay suspicion of China's growing economic and military power. He said China exercises a military strategy of active defence, with the basic principle of adhering to a self-defence position that not to take the initiative to offend others, stand for non- military means to solve disputes, take defensive posture strategically, conduct self-defence and attack only after being attacked. He cited the example of China's recent stand-off with Philippines saying "Take the recent Huangyan Island incident as an example, it is obvious that China's military strength is stronger than that of the Philippines, but we didn't use force or threat to use force, on the contrary, we have been committed to seeking solution of the dispute through diplomatic means."

He also explained that China's adherence to the path of peaceful development is determined by its history, culture and traditions, which centre on the idea of peace and harmony. In the Sri Lanka National Museum stands a stone tablet carved in 1409, which was gifted by Zhenghe, the famous navigator in ancient China to a local Buddhist temple during his stopover in Sri Lanka. "The three languages carved on the stone tablet, namely, Chinese, Persian and Tamil, expressed respect for Buddhism, Islam and Brahmanism. This shows the inclusiveness of the Chinese people towards different religions, and the respect for the harmonious co- existence of multiple cultures. Such historical culture and tradition that values peace above all has exerted profound influence on China's choice of a peaceful development path."

General Liang said in the Chinese government whitepaper China's Peaceful Development in 2011, China had solemnly declared to the world that "China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development. The core idea of this path is that China will develop itself through upholding world peace and contribute to world peace through its own development." China's adherence to the path of peaceful development was also a choice necessitated by its national conditions as China was plagued by invasions and wars brought by foreign powers in history and the Chinese people know the value of peace and the importance of accelerated development.

During his visit to the DSC, students welcomed and thanked him in Chinese which was appreciated by the visiting dignitary. The General announced a donation of \$30 million to the DSC, the highest ever made to an academic institution.

China appears to be attaching a great deal of importance to Chinese defence minister's visit. The visit was preceded by a slew of announcements were made on Chinese financial assistance to various projects:

- Assistance for construction of army camps: Largesse of \$100 million for construction of accommodation of and infrastructure facilities in Sri Lanka army camps now being established in North and East. The Chinese aid comes in the face of international demand for reducing army presence in the Tamil predominant areas of Sri Lanka. And that is what makes China special for Sri Lanka; China had been liberal in extending assistance to Sri Lanka to strengthen its armed forces during and after the Eelam war and unlike India and the U.S. who were always wary of extending such assistance.
- Railway project: Finance of \$ 278 million credit for the construction of a 26.75 Km railway track from Matara to Beliatta (part of Matara rail link with pilgrim centre of Kataragama);
- Hambantota port development Phase II: The much awaited development of Phase II of the port will be financed by the Exim Bank of China will provide a loan of \$ 600 million with Chinese government giving a concessional loan of RMB one billion. The objective of the Phase II Development is to make Hambantota a strong supplementary port to Colombo port as an international hub to consolidate Sri Lanka's status as a container trans-shipment hub in South Asian Region. At present India provides 70 percent of the container trans-shipment business at Colombo; there is a likelihood of Colombo losing a sizeable chunk of this business in the near future when India completes its container handling capability. Evidently Sri Lanka is getting ready to handle such a contingency by attracting other international traffic.
- Sri Lanka government is reported to have signed an agreement with China to buy six Xian MA-60 military transport aircraft at US\$ 105.4 million (though no public announcement has been made). Sri Lanka air force has already in service two Xian MA-60 aircraft. It is based on AN-24 platform and capable of short landing and takeoff in rugged terrain.

Even the increasing Chinese economic assistance to Sri Lanka has a strategic content. China's economic outlay in Sri Lanka is around \$ 6.5 billion; most of the 18 Chinese funded projects are infrastructural projects with long gestation period and repayment terms. According to Sunday Times, Colombo, China's commitments for the past five years other than infrastructural investments have been US\$ 2.12 billion of which \$ 2.1 billion was repayable loans with four to five years of grace period. They have been given on commercial rates of interest unlike Indian loans which are at preferential rates. Only US\$ 24 million (Rs. 3 billion) has been outright aid given to Sri Lanka. Some mega projects

like the Hambantota port development project and Norocholai power plant may take a long time to become profitable propositions. A downside of Chinese Eximbank's buyer's credit to overseas construction projects is, it is mainly extended to facilitate Chinese exports of equipment, construction machinery, materials, technical and managerial expertise, and labour services. As a result they do not generate employment opportunities for local population.

In spite of these limitations, Sri Lanka has welcomed China's economic assistance because it is available. However it is likely to face serious problems in servicing the loans for a long time to come. This makes Sri Lanka vulnerable to China's strategic pressures.

Since the end of Eelam war in 2009 there had been a steady increase in exchanges at governmental, military, and political levels between the two countries. During President Rajapaksa's August 2011 visit to Beijing Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao expressed the country's readiness to help with Sri Lanka's economic development, promote communication between the two countries with regard to infrastructure construction, enlarged two-way trade and investment, and strengthening cultural and personnel exchanges. So far, the Chinese assistance had been in accordance with the areas of cooperation identified by Premier Wen. Military linkages with Sri Lanka have been limited to sale of arms, exchange of visits of military officers and training of military personnel. Strategic military linkages with Sri Lanka, if any, had been kept under the wraps in both countries. Any such strategic understanding would adversely alter the Indian security environment.

China's soft power is increasingly visible in all aspects of Sri Lanka society – diplomatic, economic and military fronts, mega projects and infrastructure building, and trade and commerce. Chinese entry into real estate and some manufacturing projects are also coming through. And it will be only a matter of time before cheap Chinese goods monopolise shop shelves. Chinese language teaching and cultural spread are also on the cards as Confucius Centre is scheduled to open in Colombo.

Though Chinese soft power expansion is also happening in India (except for Confucius Centre), as the Chinese footprints expand in Sri Lanka they are eating into Indian space. And the Chinese have probably added a strategic dimension to it now. Even as the Chinese defence minister embarked upon his onward journey from Colombo to New Delhi, hapless Sri Lankan visitors and pilgrims hounded out from Tamil Nadu were disembarking from their aircraft at Katunayake. This would have given General Liang a peep into the soft underbelly of Indo-Sri Lanka relations exposing its weaknesses. There is no denial that India-Sri Lanka relations had been drifting for sometime despite some major initiatives from the Ministry of Commerce. The only option for India is evolve a holistic plan to upgrade its relationship with Sri Lanka so that China gets a clear message.

(Col. R Hariharan, a retired Military Intelligence specialist on South Asia, served as the head of intelligence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka 1987-90. He is associated with the South Asia Analysis Group and the Chennai Centre for China Studies. E- mail: colhari@yahoo.com ⁽¹⁾)

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