Sri Lanka wards off Western bullying

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The strange line-up of the member countries of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for or against Sri Lanka at the special session of the body scheduled to take place in Geneva on Tuesday underscores the maritime Great Game unfolding in the Indian Ocean.
Geopolitics is drowning the lamentations over the legitimate aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils for equity, justice and fair play and the perennial human-rights questions that arise when the state violates the integrity of the individual. Control of the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean through which 70% of total world traffic of petroleum products passes - and half of the world's container traffic - takes precedence over the tragic plight of the 300,000 ethnic Tamils of Sri Lanka uprooted from their life. The focus of the world powers is on becoming the "Lord of the Malaccas". The special session is being convened in Geneva at the request of 17 of the 47 members of the UNHRC, including Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Britain. Hovering in the background is the United States. The initiative is primarily of the European Union (EU) and it aims at forcing Sri Lanka to face charges of gross human-rights violations in its war against the Tamil insurgents. An UNHRC recommendation to set up an international commission of inquiry will not mean the end of the world, but it can be a needless headache. An UNHRC special session has been called only on 10 previous occasions. However, Colombo is not browbeaten. The seasoned poker player has tabled a counter resolution titled "Assistance to Sri Lanka in the promotion and Protection of Human Rights". Believe it or not, the Sri Lankan resolution commends Colombo for its victory over terrorism and solicits funding from a grateful international community. The 12 co-sponsors of the Sri Lankan resolution include China, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia. Russia, China backing Colombo The outcome of the UNHRC special session can be foretold. The EU won't get anywhere. It had better think of approaching the International Criminal Court based in The Hague. But then, Sri Lanka is not a signatory state. The "international community" can get the United Nations Security Council to refer the case to the ICC, in which case the ICC is mandated to summon a non-signatory state. But then China and Russia wield veto power. As soon as Colombo declared victory in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu took friendly note of it. "As a friendly neighbour, China has kept a close eye on how the Sri Lankan situation developed. We sincerely hope Sri Lanka will make efforts to accomplish national reconciliation, social stability and economic progress," Ma said.

Equally, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko "welcomed" Colombo's success in "restoring control over the entire territory of the country" and liberating the civilians held hostage. Russia "supports the fight of the Sri Lankan government against terrorism and separatism and for state sovereignty and territorial integrity" and stands ready to "strengthen further its cooperation [with Sri Lanka] ... both in a bilateral format and in regional and international organizations on counter-terrorism and on other themes of mutual concern". China and Russia will ensure that the "international community" cannot torment Colombo. They have invited Sri Lanka to come close to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a "dialogue partner". In essence, Sri Lanka is transforming as the theatre where Russia and China are frontally challenging the US's incremental global strategy to establish a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presence in the Indian Ocean region. The US has succeeded in bringing NATO up to the Persian Gulf region. In October 2007, NATO conducted its first-ever naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. The alliance is swiftly expanding its relationship with Pakistan. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen told a US Congressional hearing on Thursday, "Where I see NATO going is increasingly towards a broader and more in-depth relationship with Pakistan, because of the common interests." But it is Sri Lanka that will be the jewel in NATO's Indian Ocean crown. Russia and China (and Iran) are determined to frustrate the US geostrategy.
US pressure won't work But the US has taken a position of high principles - the human-rights situation in Sri Lanka. It can block Sri Lanka's application for a US$1.9 billion emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Sri Lankan economy is in dire straits. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on May 15 that this "is not an appropriate time" to talk about the IMF loan. She confirmed that the US had "raised questions about the IMF loan at this time". State Department spokesman Ian Kelly has linked the release of the IMF loan to Colombo allowing the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international aid agencies, to access the camps where "hundreds of thousands" of internally displaced Tamils uprooted in the fighting are sheltered.

Washington is peeved that Colombo already forgot it was the vehement US support that enabled Colombo to launch the military operations against Sri Lanka in 2006. But the Sri Lankan government would say it reciprocated the US backing by signing in March 2007 an Access and Cross Servicing Agreement with the US that allows American warships and aircraft to use facilities in Sri Lanka.

At any rate, the US feels snubbed that Sri Lanka spurned its offer a few months ago to dispatch a naval force to evacuate or provide humanitarian assistance to the Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone. An "assessment team" of the US Navy visited Sri Lanka with a view to work out the range of options for the operation. But Colombo somehow developed cold feet about the wisdom of inviting US "humanitarian intervention". Quite possibly, third countries might have alerted Colombo to the risks involved.

Unsurprisingly, Washington is pressuring Colombo. Kelly said on Thursday, "The international community needs to make

an assessment of exactly what happened and consult with the Sri Lankan government on the way forward ... we need to take things a step at a time. We need to focus on the humanitarian situation, and we need to focus on starting a political reconciliation process. Once we take those steps, we can start looking at the broader issue of economic and trade issues [IMF loan]".

However, the US pressure tactic may not work. Like in the case of Myanmar or Sudan, if Washington steps up pressure, China may come to Sri Lanka's help. There is moral muddiness all around. Simply put, a "containment strategy" on the part of the US towards Sri Lanka becomes unworkable. Testy times lie ahead. On Friday, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa accused unnamed foreign powers of having tried to stop the military operations against the LTTE by "threatening to haul us before war crimes tribunals" and that he was ready "to go to the gallows". On Saturday, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (who is the president's brother) told an Indian TV channel, "If one talks of taking our military to a war crimes tribunal, before that you have to take US troops, UK troops, all those troops and all those leaders, into war crimes [tribunals]." He was angrily responding to the EU demand for an independent inquiry into alleged war crimes by Sri Lankan army. India-China rivalry The countries that are backing Sri Lanka at the UNHRC special session on Tuesday have a convergence of interest insofar as they oppose the doctrine of "humanitarian intervention" in sovereign states. China and India have been at the receiving end in the past on the human-rights issue and have extended mutual support in warding off UNHRC pressure. But in the present context, the motives of China and India are complex. The fact is, China has exploited Sri Lanka's vulnerability to secure the pre-eminent status of a "steadfast ally". China is building in Hambantota a $1 billion port that it may eventually use as a re-fuelling and docking station for its navy as it patrols the Indian Ocean and protects China's sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. Jane's Defence Weekly has reported on Chinese supplies of ammunition and ordnance for the Sri Lankan army and navy. The Stockholm International Peace Foundation says China gifted Sri Lanka six F7 jet fighters last year. Chinese aid for Sri Lanka touched $1 billion last year. China is presently Sri Lanka's number one foreign donor, overtaking Japan. (The US and the UK gave measly amounts of $7.4 million and $1.9 million, respectively.) India views the Chinese inroads into Sri Lanka with disquiet as part of a broad move into the Indian Ocean. But India faces an acute dilemma. Delhi hopes to influence Colombo to seek an early settlement of the Tamil problem, which has serious implications for India's politics and national security. But its capacity to cajole the diehard Sinhalese nationalists to compromise and reconcile suffers as long as China backs Colombo to the hilt. Colombo's defiant statements to the West also hold a subtle message for Delhi. If Delhi tries to roll back its substantial political, military and economic support to Sri Lanka, China will simply step in. The lure of Sri Lanka for China cannot be overestimated by Delhi. Colombo plays the game beautifully. Before procuring weapons from China, Colombo first presents the wish list in Delhi. If Delhi declines, it promptly approaches Beijing. (This was what happened in the case of Hambantota port, too.) Therefore, Delhi is unsure about Washington's pressure tactic. It has known Colombo all through as a tough negotiator - be it on the rights of Indian fishermen or over Kachativu Island or regarding stateless persons of Indian origin. Colombo stonewalled for decades all Indian attempts to mediate a settlement to the Tamil problem. Great Game in the Indian Ocean Clearly, it is far too simplistic to portray Sri Lanka as a mere playpen of China-India rivalry. There is a huge geopolitical backdrop. The US's naval dominance is declining. On the other hand, China's navy may have more warships than the US's in the coming decade. In the March-April issue of Foreign Affairs magazine, noted strategic thinker and author Robert Kaplan analyzed the power plays in the Indian Ocean. As Kaplan wrote, the US is "beginning an elegant decline by leveraging the growing sea power of allies such as India and Japan to balance against China".

To a great extent, the US volte face on Rajapksa's war (after having been such a strong supporter until quite recently) stems from the strategic setback it suffered insofar as while the American admirals had been scared away by Sri Lanka's ethnic strife, China simply moved in. The West finds Rajapaksa getting too close to China for its comfort. On China's part, however, the fueling station in Sri Lanka becomes vital for optimally using the series of port facilities that it has lined up in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar connecting the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. The naval presence in Sri Lanka becomes invaluable for China if the planned canal across the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand materializes connecting the Indian Ocean with China's Pacific coast, a project that has the potential to dramatically shift the balance of power in Asia. Therefore, no matter what it takes, Beijing will strive to expand its influence in Sri Lanka and help Colombo ward off US bullying.But, having said that, the US also has a need for greater cooperation with China. To quote Kaplan, the US "seizes every opportunity to incorporate China's navy into international alliances; a US-Chinese understanding at sea is crucial for the stabilization of world politics in the 21st century". This in turn creates a compulsion for the US to act both as a "broker" between India and China and as a moderator of the competition between the two hugely ambitious powers. As Kaplan put it, even as India and China "bump into each other" in the Indian Ocean, "the job of managing their peaceful rise will fall on the US Navy to a significant extent". Curiously, during a visit to Delhi on May 14, the US Pacific Command chief Admiral Timothy J Keating dropped a bombshell among the unsuspecting Indians by revealing that he declined an offer recently from a top-ranking Chinese naval official for a US-Chinese understanding to split the seas east of Hawaii and west of Hawaii between the two navies. Keating went on to say that on his part, he invited China to join the annual US-India naval exercises codenamed "Malabar Exercises" (which strategists in Delhi fancy as their exclusive partnership with the US), but China declined, saying it preferred to be an observer. Kaplan was right in saying, "There will be surely tensions between the three [US, Chinese, Indian] navies, especially as the gaps in their relative strength begins to close." What all this adds up to in immediate terms is that Colombo will be plainly dismissive of the UNHRC meet on Tuesday. Indeed, its first instinct is to hoot with derision. The Sinhala establishment is fully aware of Sri Lanka's immense strategic value in the accelerating power struggle in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka sits on a central theater of global conflict and competition and will derive leverage to reinforce its sovereignty and

independence and its strategic autonomy. Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service. His assignments included the Soviet Union, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kuwait and Turkey.Courtesy: asiatime.com