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## Indo-Lanka Relations: Avoiding past errors

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by Dayan Jayatilaka In 1987, the Sri Lankan armed forces had the initiative, and if the operation was taken to a finish, the Tigers may have been defeated. Instead, by the second half of the year the Sri Lankan army was in barracks and the Tigers were off the hook. Both Sri Lanka and India paid for that turn of events, leaving only Prabhakaran the beneficiary. That tragic turn of events was made possible by a cluster of factors, ranging from a Sri Lankan foreign policy which departed from our traditional Non-aligned stance and sought to ignore India and ally with the West, to the power of the Tamil Nadu factor upon decision-making in Delhi.

The commanders of "Operation Liberation" commonly known as "Vadamarachchi Operation". From left to right: Lt Col. Vipul Boteju, Lt Col. Sarath Jayawardane, Col. Wijaya Wimalaratne, Brig. Denzil Kobbekaduwa and Maj Gotabaya Rajapakse [1987, Jaffna] Tamil Nadu will never go away, and will assume increasing significance as elections draw near (anytime between November 08 and May 09). However, this time around, Delhi is not letting Tamil Nadu effect a change in policy which will tilt towards the Tigers. During the IPKF presence in Sri Lanka, the Tigers could have been defeated in one of two ways: either joint operations between the Indian and Sri Lankan armed forces, aided by the anti-Tiger Tamil groups, or devolution should have been expedited so that Delhi could have unleashed the IPKF at full stretch to smash the Tigers. Neither happened, because of two factors: anti-Indianism and anti-devolution campaigns in Sri Lanka, and anti-Sri Lankanism and anti-Indianism in Tamil Nadu. Today, only we Sinhalese can trip ourselves up as the Sri Lankan armed forces enter the strategic offensive against the Tigers. We can do this by permitting the same factors that damaged relations with India the last time, to raise their head this time too – anti-Indian xenophobia, anti-devolution sentiment and sheer chauvinism ("Ethnic problem? What ethnic problem?"). Conversely, we can avoid the 1987 outcome (which was on the drawing board at least since 1984) or a variant, if our policy and practice factor in the predictable concerns of India. When India says that there is no military solution to the Lankan conflict, it does not mean that we should cease operations and talk to Prabhakaran. It means that our political track must keep pace with our military track. While it may have concerns about our sources of supplies and alignments, we cannot forgo these without equivalents in place. So there are some issues at the core of our security interests that we may be unable to unilaterally concede on. But with these exceptions, there is much that we can agree upon. India is clearly supportive of the revival of the 13th amendment and is keen on its full, undiluted and speedy implementation. This should not pose a problem since the President's position is "maximum devolution within a unitary framework", and the APRC is already at hand as an instrumentality. Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord signed in Colombo on July 29, 1987, between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka's President J.R. Jayewardene India is also mindful of a refugee spillover and the effects that may have in Tamil Nadu. Thus they would be sensitive to the effects of the war on Tamil civilians. This is a legitimate concern for both our countries, and everything should be done to keep our security endeavors as surgical as possible. World events underscore that to the degree that soft targets are affected it becomes more difficult to sustain campaigns against hard targets. If hard-line elements in the South prevent or derail a policy convergence between Sri Lanka and India, they will only retard and limit the support that India can extend to us, at a time when we need to cut off supplies reaching the LTTE and prevent the use of Tamil Nadu once again as a rearguard and procurement zone. Thus as in the 1980s, anti-Indianism and anti-devolution sentiment in the South will only help get Prabhakaran and the Tigers off the hook. Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka before one of their missions against LTTE terrorists between July 1987–March 1990

We have a choice: either Sri Lanka is the guarantor of the safety, security and rights of the Sri Lankan Tamil people, or India will become that guarantor, whether the LTTE exists or not. The weight of Tamil Nadu makes it impossible for India to do otherwise.

India is not what it was in 1987. It is far more powerful and has earned far greater respect in the world. There is no one that Sri Lanka can play against India. In the 1980s, the UNP thought that it could balance the West off against India and the country paid for that folly. Today the ultra-left and pseudo-patriots cherish the illusion that they can play China off against India. They do not know of the burgeoning relationship between the two, including joint military exercises. No one will take the side of little Sri Lanka against the rising global economic power India, and in strictly practical terms, no one can. If we allow any force or factor to estrange us from India, even our friends and sources of support/supply will begin to back off. If on the other hand Sri Lanka and India can achieve policy consensus, Sri Lanka can leverage the exponentially growing strength of India, in bringing our war to a successful conclusion. Shiv Shankar Menon A few years back, when I was teaching briefly in Washington DC, I was invited to a symposium on the Strategic Landscape of South and Central Asia at SAIC in Virginia. I was one of twelve participants, another of whom was a member of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time in overall charge of the US military in Afghanistan. During the lunch break he was at pains to explain away something that had happened in the joint US-India air exercises that year, 2005. In those war games, the Indian Air Force team had beaten the US Air Force unit. So let's be clear. Sri Lanka can fight and beat the Tigers, one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups as the FBI puts it, or terrorist armies, as I prefer to call it. And we can do so while resisting the pressures of the West. The one thing Sri Lanka cannot do is fight the Tigers – and also take on the Indians. Not if we want to survive as a single country, and keep our military machine intact. Of course, the question need not arise, because the Indians aren't trying to harm or hamper us. Contrary to the wild speculation in the Lankan press, by super-patriots on the one hand and minority or cosmopolitan critics of the Sri Lankan state on the other, the top Indian trio which visited us recently did not tell us to stop the war and/or talk to Prabhakaran. No report in the Indian or international media came even close to suggesting such a demand. That the delegation did so

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is wishful thinking on the part of some (ultranationalist Tamils and far-left pacifist Sinhalese) and paranoia on the part of others (the JVP and sundry xenophobes). Nor did the Indian team give the Sri Lankan side a blank cheque, as hysterically charged by Mr. Vaiko. The quality Indian media has published several reports when sifted through and spliced together, provide a fairly accurate picture of what India's preoccupations are. None of them are contrary to the interests and goals of the Sri Lankan state.

(These are the strictly personal views of the writer)

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