

India takes a more direct hand in Sri Lankan affairs

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New Delhi has responded to last month's election of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse by stepping up pressure on Colombo to revive the island's so-called peace process. Amid fears of a breakdown of the current ceasefire, the Indian government is concerned that any return to armed conflict will have a destabilising impact throughout the region.

Rajapakse won the November 17 election with the backing of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). His electoral pacts with these parties included provocative measures to revise the ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), abolish a joint mechanism for the distribution of tsunami aid and rule out a federated state as part of any peace deal.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh formally congratulated Rajapakse and invited him to visit New Delhi at an early date for talks. A flurry of diplomatic activity has followed in which India has maintained the pressure on Rajapakse to back away from any aggressive move against the LTTE and to lay the basis for renewed peace talks.

India's High Commissioner to Colombo, Nirupama Rao, met with the new Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake on November 26, stating that, "India would extend its fullest support to Sri Lanka to resolve its ethnic issue". She reiterated India's stake in the conflict, declaring: "India considers that the national security of Sri Lanka is a responsibility of India, and India will do everything possible to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."

Rao's comments not only send a sharp warning to the LTTE against any renewal of war for a separate Tamil state but point to India's broader ambitions as the main regional powerbroker. While reassuring Colombo of support in any military conflict, New Delhi is also

implicitly declaring its right to intervene to safeguard its strategic interests.

The first overseas trip by new Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera was to New Delhi on December 1, underscoring the importance for the Colombo government of close relations with India. While the visit came after Rajapakse had reiterated his support for the JVP and JHU demands, Samaraweera reassured India that the new government remained committed to the ceasefire. All that Colombo was seeking, he said, was "a review" to make the ceasefire "more effective".

Samaraweera reflected similar statements by Rajapakse to the diplomatic corps in Colombo. Having won the presidential poll by whipping up Sinhala chauvinist sentiment, Rajapakse, under pressure from local business leaders and the US and EU as well as India, is leaving the door open to a resumption of the peace process. In this precarious balancing act, Rajapakse is looking to India in particular for assistance.

Samaraweera met with Prime Minister Singh, who, according to media reports, bluntly told him that India favoured the maintenance of the ceasefire. Singh also held out the prospect of further steps toward finalising a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the two countries. Closer ties with the large, expanding Indian economy would provide a welcome boost for the flagging Sri Lankan economy.

Samaraweera's trip has paved the way for a visit by Rajapakse later this month. The Sri Lankan president is keen to exploit economic opportunities and is also calling on India to play "a major role" in the peace process. Such a step would marginalise Norway, the formal facilitator of peace talks, which has come under fire from Sinhala chauvinists for its alleged pro-LTTE

“bias”.

If talks take place with the LTTE, Rajapakse calculates that India will be supportive of a deal that accords the LTTE a relatively minor place in any power-sharing arrangement. Indian governments have repeatedly opposed the LTTE’s demand for a separate Tamil state. New Delhi also criticised the LTTE’s proposal in late 2003 for an interim administration with extensive autonomous powers. India is concerned that any peace deal in Sri Lanka will become a precedent for other separatist conflicts on the subcontinent, particularly the long-running dispute with rival Pakistan over Kashmir.

India has maintained military pressure on the LTTE through defence arrangements with Colombo, including joint naval patrolling to curb the LTTE’s activities at sea. On December 1, the chief of India’s southern army command, Lieutenant General B. S. Takhar, began a five-day trip to Sri Lanka. He pointedly visited the military complex at Vavuniya in the north of the island close to LTTE-held territory.

At the same time, Indian Prime Minister Singh cannot afford to side too openly with Colombo for fear of alienating allies in the southern India state of Tamil Nadu where sympathy for the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka is strong. The Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) and Pattali Makkal Kachchi, which are partners in Singh’s United Peoples Alliance (UPA), all exploit the Sri Lankan conflict as a touchstone for their communal politics.

In comments to the media on December 4, MDMK general secretary V. Gopalaswamy warned Singh that Rajapakse’s proposal for India to “take the lead” in the peace talks was “a deliberate trap”. He urged Singh to allow and assist Norway to continue in its role as facilitator of the peace process and cautioned against India being drawn into a repetition of the disastrous 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord.

Under the accord, India dispatched 100,000 “peace-keeping” troops to the North and East of the island to enforce the disarmament of the LTTE. Bitter fighting soon broke but that resulted in the deaths of 2,000 Indian soldiers. India was finally compelled to withdraw following Sinhala chauvinist agitation by the JVP against “Indian imperialism” and a request by Sri Lankan President R. Premadasa for the troops to leave.

Following the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, India blamed the LTTE and listed it as a terrorist organisation. Although reluctant to become directly entangled in the conflict, there have been signs of a shift since the late 1990s. India has provided training and other support for the Sri Lankan military. While not immediately involved in the peace process, New Delhi has backed Norwegian efforts and supported the 2002 ceasefire.

India’s developing strategic ties with the US, particularly since September 2001, have also encouraged New Delhi to play a more interventionist role in the region, including in Sri Lanka. At present, US and Indian interests in ending the Sri Lankan conflict coincide quite closely. Both regard the civil war as a danger to the political stability of the broader region, particularly in southern India, where US and other foreign companies have major investments in the burgeoning IT industry.

Sections of the Indian ruling elite are pressing for New Delhi to put aside the bitter experience of the Indo-Lankan Accord and take a more direct hand in Sri Lanka affairs. A UPI report last month cited several commentators who warned of Rajapakse’s promotion of “Sinhala nationalism” and urged Singh to take “control the country’s policy toward Sri Lanka before it takes a dangerous turn”.

Political analyst A.B. Mahapatra declared: “Sri Lanka could soon join the group of neighbouring countries that have been causing problems for New Delhi”. The obvious implication is that India cannot afford to sit by but must intervene to defend its interests in what the Indian ruling class regards as its sphere of influence. Any intervention, however, could not only compound political instability in Sri Lanka but may also set New Delhi at odds with the major powers.

With the potential for Sri Lanka to slide back into civil war, both Singh and Rajapakse will be walking a fine line when they meet later this month.



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