

Indian delegation visits Sri Lanka: A sign of rising regional rivalries

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A top-level unannounced visit by Indian officials to Sri Lanka on June 20-21 has underscored New Delhi's concern to strengthen its strategic influence on the island. The three-member delegation, which arrived on a special Indian air force flight, included National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and Defence Secretary Vijay Singh.

The Indian officials held closed-door talks with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and senior military commanders. In addition, they met with various Tamil parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which functions as a political mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The official reason for the trip was to review security arrangements for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference in Colombo later this month. However, the Indian press reported that New Delhi has been concerned about the escalating civil war on the island and the manner in which India's rivals—Pakistan and China—have forged closer relations with Colombo by providing military aid.

The *Times of India* reported that the delegation had expressed "India's disquiet over Sri Lanka continuing to source weapons systems in a major way from China and Pakistan." The article noted that "during the wide-ranging discussions on 'mutual concerns'... the Indian delegation promised 'all help' in the military supplies, intelligence and training arenas."

India, which regards Sri Lanka as part of its sphere of influence, has been engaged in a careful political balancing act. While providing some military supplies and assistance, the Indian government has been careful not to provoke opposition in the southern Indian state

of Tamil Nadu, where hostility to the repression and discrimination suffered by Sri Lankan Tamils is strong.

As a result, Pakistan and China have filled the gap. Sri Lanka has bought Jian-7 fighters, JY-11 3D air surveillance radars, armoured personnel carriers, and other weapon systems from China. It has also signed a \$37.6 million deal with China's Poly Technologies for arms, ammunition, mortars and bombs.

China's involvement in Sri Lanka is not limited to defence. Beijing has replaced Japan as the country's biggest donor. China's loans and other aid to Sri Lanka last year totalled nearly \$US1 billion. The Exim Bank of China is to provide \$1 billion loan for the construction of new port facilities in the southern town of Hambantota and China is also involved in building two power plants and a highway.

The Hambantota port is particularly significant as China has a broad strategy to establish facilities, including in Burma and Pakistan, for its expanding navy. Beijing's aim is to defend its supply lines to the Middle East and Africa and to counter US efforts to strategically encircle it. Chinese plans collide with Indian ambitions to establish its naval dominance in the Indian Ocean.

Indian National Security Advisor Narayanan bluntly declared in May 2007: "It is high time that Sri Lanka understood that India is the big power in the region and ought to refrain from going to Pakistan or China for weapons, as we are prepared to accommodate them within the framework of our foreign policy."

Over the past year, India's support for the Sri Lankan military has increased. In response to small LTTE air raids, India began supplying Sri Lanka with anti-aircraft guns and radar designed to detect low-flying aircraft. India is also providing intelligence and the Indian navy is helping its Sri Lankan counterpart to halt

LTTE supplies. Last year the Sri Lankan navy destroyed several LTTE supply ships.

In April, after the Sri Lankan army suffered a serious setback at Muhamalai, India provided a \$100 million soft loan to buy military equipment. An elated Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake told *Thinakkural*: “Providing adequate support for the war against the Tigers, India has given her blessings [for us] to totally destroy the Tigers. This will happen very soon.”

India is still cautious about providing weapons to Sri Lanka. With an election due in the next year, the Congress-led ruling coalition in New Delhi is trying to avoid alienating support in Tamil Nadu. While hostile to the LTTE, the Indian government has called for a “political solution” to Sri Lanka’s “ethnic problem”. In a further gesture, the delegation invited the pro-LTTE TNA to visit New Delhi.

The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu is one of Congress’s partners. The opposition Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) wrote to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh just after the Indian delegation visited Colombo, accusing him of helping Sri Lanka to carry out genocide against the Tamil people. The MDMK called on Singh not to participate in the SAARC summit in Colombo. Clearly the MDMK hopes to make Sri Lanka an election issue.

India, however, has ambitions to become the dominant regional power and is not about to boycott the SAARC summit. It also has growing economic interests in Sri Lanka, including in areas recently recaptured from the LTTE. The Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) is going ahead with plans to build a coal-fired power plant in Sampur, which was seized from the LTTE in 2006.

More broadly, India is expected to conclude a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Sri Lanka this month that will boost a free trade agreement signed in 2000. An Indian company recently won a licence to explore for oil and natural gas in Sri Lanka’s Mannar Basin. The Indian company RITES-IRCON is involved in upgrading the Colombo-Matara railway. The Indian foreign ministry web site noted that “50 percent of Indian joint ventures and 54 percent of Indian equity investment in South Asia are in Sri Lanka”.

While it is compelled to placate public opinion in Tamil Nadu, the Indian government is clearly supportive of the renewed war in Sri Lanka to destroy the LTTE and thus open the way for greater Indian involvement in the island. After the Indian delegation departed, Sri Lankan Information Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa told a press conference on June 25: “There was no pressure from India to halt military operations at all. India is very happy about the existing situation.”



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