

Former diplomat admits India's role in Sri Lankan communal war

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A recent book by retired Indian diplomat Shivashankar Menon reveals New Delhi's backing for the Colombo government during the final stage of the war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Menon, a former foreign secretary and national security advisor to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was one of a handful of top officials involved in maintaining Indo-Sri Lanka ties during this period. He speaks for those sections of the Indian ruling class that advocate New Delhi's alignment with Washington's strategic interests in the region and economic and military encirclement of China.

Entitled *Choices: Inside the making of India's foreign policy*, Menon's book attempts to justify India's policies regarding the US, China, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Menon was instrumental in cultivating these policies during the India's sharp turn toward US imperialism following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990–91 economic crisis. These developments, he writes, “enabled India to break with domestic political and economic certainties.”

Menon's account of the Sri Lankan civil war in Chapter 4 of the book is related to the Indian elite's turn to the US. Endorsing Washington's “pivot to Asia,” New Delhi intervened in various South Asian countries to undermine Beijing's influence in the region.

Entitled “Force works: Sri Lanka Eliminates Tamil Tigers, 2009,” Chapter 4 sheds light on India's role in the 30-year civil war. New Delhi coldly calculated that large-scale civilian casualties were justifiable as long as they assured the elimination of the LTTE and kept Colombo under India's sway.

In early 2009, the WSWWS pointed out that India was

encouraging and materially supporting the Sri Lankan government's renewed efforts to rout the LTTE in the island's North and East. The book confirms this, admitting that “intelligence and interdiction” by the Indian Navy “starved the LTTE of supplies by the sea.”

Menon fondly remembers unpublicised regular midnight flights to Colombo with the then Indian foreign minister and current Indian President Pranab Mukherjee for briefings and discussion with President Mahinda Rajapakse and his army commander Sarath Fonseka. These visits occurred during the first five months of 2009, that is, until the military annihilation of the LTTE on May 18.

Menon justifies New Delhi's support for Colombo's brutal escalation of the communal war, purely on the grounds of India's regional interests. He points out that Rajapakse had garnered political and military support for the war from China, Pakistan and “to an extent” the US. “If we stood aside,” he writes, “defending the killers of an Indian Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi]” it would have amounted to “abdication of a geopolitically strategic neighbour to other powers.”

Gandhi, Indian prime minister from 1984 to 1989 and then in the opposition, was killed in Tamil Nadu by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991. Gandhi intervened in the Sri Lankan war when Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayawardene's government suffered a series of military defeats at the hands of the LTTE and rural unrest in the south.

In July 1987, Gandhi signed the Indo-Lanka Accord, which provided limited powers to the Tamil elites in the North and East of Sri Lanka, and then sent the Indian army to disarm the LTTE. Gandhi's assassination was revenge by the LTTE leadership.

Menon, with all the calculations of a ruthless strategist, refers to Sri Lanka as an “aircraft carrier

parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast.” It was inevitable, he writes, that India had to keep Sri Lanka free of “antagonistic outside influences” and prevent the growth of Tamil separatism that could affect Tamil Nadu. In other words, the massive civilian casualties during the Sri Lankan war were acceptable, as long as the outcome politically benefitted India.

The book paints an entirely false picture of a speedy reconstruction of Sri Lanka’s North and East after the war. Attributing credit to Rajapakse’s regime, Menon declares: “Sri Lanka can claim to have rehabilitated and restored normalcy much faster than other countries that endured shorter civil wars.”

This is a gross lie. The North and East still remain effectively under military occupation. People live under grueling economic hardships, destroyed infrastructure and with no psycho-social support to recover from the traumas of war. Eight years since the war, most people in the Vanni district still live in make-shift houses.

Menon’s portrayal serves to justify Indian support for the Rajapakse regime’s war and to suggest that the bloody events—tens of thousands Tamil civilians were killed—have produced positive outcomes. Menon contends that Sri Lanka failed to find lasting peace because of Rajapakse’s personal lack of “political magnanimity towards the vanquished,” which, he suggests, only became evident after the war.

However, after 2009, New Delhi, like Washington, became increasingly concerned about Rajapakse’s relations with China. In an attempt to pressure the Rajapakse government to distance itself from Beijing, the US sponsored a series of resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for war crimes investigations.

When Rajapakse failed to respond, Washington moved a resolution in the UNHRC in March 2014 calling for an international investigation. This set the stage for the regime-change operation that culminated in the ousting of Rajapakse in the January 2015 presidential election. Maithripala Sirisena was installed with the help of then opposition leader and present Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

India tentatively supported some of Washington’s UNHRC resolutions, including that of March 2014. Its caution was on the grounds that more pressure could push Colombo closer to Beijing. Even though

Rajapakse was “much more compliant with Chinese demands,” his brother and defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse was assuring India about the nature of the military relations with China, Menon writes. The defence secretary was “more sensitive to India’s concerns.” These assurances, Menon writes, were respected by the Rajapakses until May 2014.

Menon’s book does not explain why the situation changed in May 2014 for India. However, that month Rajapakse visited Beijing and for the second time voiced his support for China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative. He also invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Sri Lanka in September that year. The US and India were hostile to the MSR, saying it was part of China’s military initiatives in the Indian Ocean.

In May 2014, the Congress-led Indian government was defeated. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led regime came to power and Ajit Doval became the new national security advisor. The new government backed the US initiated regime-change process in Sri Lanka.

Menon’s account shatters claims by the Sri Lankan Tamil elite, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), that New Delhi is concerned about the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. India’s policies were always determined by the ruling elite’s regional and global geo-political interests. Likewise, Sri Lanka’s Tamil nationalist parties back Indian and US geo-political interests in order to secure their own privileges.

As the WWSWS has warned, the installation of the pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government in Sri Lanka has not resolved any of the issues that led to the brutal 30-year civil war. Instead, Colombo is attempting to impose a police-state style grip over the working class and the oppressed population.

Menon’s account does not cover the period after the Sri Lankan regime-change in 2015. He cynically ends his account, however, by claiming: “Sri Lanka today is a better place without the LTTE and the civil war and India contributed to making that outcome possible.”



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