

Strategic Relevance of Sri Lanka to India's National Security Objectives

BRIG S S CHANDEL, SC, VSM

India's deep and seemingly endless involvement into Sri Lanka imbroglio makes one wonder as to the reason why we got into it. While one end of the spectrum of opinion would suggest that it was a device to divert the public attention from the embarrassing domestic issues, the other end led by the defence strategists and foreign affairs specialists strongly pitch for an overriding strategic importance of keeping the Island security under India's influence. In this article it is proposed to examine the basic strategic relevance of Sri Lanka to India's national security. Six reasons may be advanced to support the argument for India's intervention. Firstly, the Indian presence - it must be military to have any meaning - will facilitate securing of India's commercial sea lanes. Secondly, such a presence will ward off the likely hostile naval/military presence from the proximity of the Indian subcontinent. Thirdly, India will have exclusive rights to the blue water port of Trincomalee. Fourthly, it will help to keep out the influence of such publicity/propaganda organs of presumably hostile nations such as Israel and USA. Fifthly, we will acquire exclusive rights to operate the Trincomalee oil tank farm. Sixthly, a successful separatist movement in Sri Lanka may trigger off a similar movement in Tamil Nadu with a grand aim of unifying the Tamil people living across the Sea. It is proposed to examine these systematically to determine their soundness or otherwise.

SECURITY OF INDIA'S SEA TRAFFIC LANES

Securing India's Sea Traffic Lanes begs many questions. Have India's sea traffic lanes being threatened so far by any hostile nation? Who can possibly be these hostile nations? What possible and justifiable reason can they have to take such provocative action against India? What will such an action imply in terms of domestic and international repercussions? What will be the military implications of such intervention? Is India any worse placed to tackle such an intervention from within its home shores than from across the Bay of Bengal or Arabian Sea? Let's try to answer these questions...

THREAT TO INDIA'S SEA TRAFFIC LANES

A large percentage of India's trade is carried in foreign vessels which are owned by varieties of tycoons. They have their own understandings and levers whereby to ensure safety of their vessels. Hitting these merchant men will invite wrath of the affected parties which exercise tremendous influence in high places. It is an equally formidable task to find out in high seas as to which

vessel is carrying vital cargo for India. Next, one's adversary needs to have a powerful blue water Navy to hit out at high seas with impunity because inevitably it will mean retaliation by India from its coastal air bases and Navy. If so threatened she may be given a helping hand by her friends and allies for their own reasons of maintaining an acceptable strategic balance. Thus it may not be cost effective or strategically wise for any country adequately endowed with credible naval power to threaten India's sea traffic. At any rate who could be such countries? USA? China? Pakistan?

USA AND USSR EQUATION

As an undisputed superpower the USA's interests in the strategic dispositions in the Indian ocean is quite obvious. With a base in Sri Lanka, it will be able to effectively dominate the Indian ocean and the Indian subcontinent. Indian ocean nations like Indonesia, Phillippines are not material in this context because Indonesia follows a neutral policy while Philipines is already a full fledged American ally. What can then be the American strategic gain by acquiring a Naval base in Trincomalee? More so when it tacitly acknowledges India's regionally predominant role in this region. Will it not set back the process of detente towards which the two superpowers have been tortuously inching towards since the times of Nixon - Kissinger overtures till the signing of the treaty for withdrawal of all medium range ballistic missiles and gradual elimination of all nuclear weapons in the next 25 years?

Thus during 1971 operation when the American in TG 74 consisting of a sizeable naval force headed for Bangladesh, the Russian ships were off Sri Lanka. Even the British pitched in. So there were about 15 foreign naval ships, manoeuvring in the close proximity of the subcontinent. The point is that with the acquisition of formidable blue water capability by the Soviet Navy and significant air lift capability, any increase in the US Armed Forces presence in Sri Lanka is surely likely to be countervailed by the Russians. The number of Soviet friendship treaties with various nations e.g. India, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Angola, Mozambique, Vietnam, South Yeman and Syria of the Indian Ocean littoral confirm the above observation. As far as the USA is concerned, it returns the compliment in the same coin. The most potent of these is their base at Diego Garcia which houses storage capacity for 64000 barrels of fuel, a 10,000 feet runway, pens and hangers for bombers, a 5,500 feet berthing place and anchoring facility for 10 ships including the largest aircraft carrier. They are capable of achieving their strategic objective from their existing strategic disposition without upping the stakes by acquiring a base in Trincomalee. However, they may use proxies to acquire leverage in the Island. Pakistan, for USA, may be one such.

PAKISTAN

It is somewhat preposterous to imagine Pakistan occupying the centre stage in the strategic scenario of Sri Lanka for a number of reasons even if Sri Lanka's recalcitrant Finance Minister does make a statement to this effect in a fit of anger on the morrow of the assassination Mr H R Abhaywardane (INDIAN EXPRESS 23 Dec 87). Firstly, the inherent lack of staying power of the Pakistan Navy. Pakistan has got basically a small Navy with limited offensive capability against India on the western coast. It has 7 destroyers 6 ocean going submarines 3 minesweepers and about 20 attack craft which have a limited endurance of about five days. Of these, at a pinch, she can spare about 3 destroyers 8 patrol crafts, 2 submarines to deploy in Sri Lanka if it has to retain its balance at home waters. Its Navy in Sri Lanka will not have any air cover. If it fields a balanced force of Army, Navy and Air Force (and it can be no other way) it will be both insignificant and ineffective. Hence any involvement of Pakistan in the Island is likely to seriously jeopardise its defence posture. What role can it be fielded for? Deter an Indian aggression on an island which has got 500 Nms of sea coast? To quell the JVP insurgency as Mr Ronnie De Mel will have it? The Militarily innocent Finance Minister does not know the practical implications of mounting and sustaining such a force. It's cost may be even more than Rs 3 crores a day that India is said to be spending in persuading the LTTE to come to the table; will such an adventure have the sanction of the USA? How will the Soviet Union view it? Who will foot the bill? What adversary role can such a force play against Indian shipping? Sink Indian merchant men without any provocation? Launch an amphibious assault at Madras or Vishakapatnam? To any trained military mind such suggestions would not deserve even a derisive snort. One cannot imagine the astute Pakistani military leadership getting itself involved into an unholy mess like that. Therefore if the involvement of USA, USSR and Pakistan appears less than likely then can the Keeny Meeny mercenaries or a few Mossad personnel do much good to Sri Lanka's security interest or India's? No serious strategic thinker will spare a serious thought to such a proposition. Moreover, all the discussion above had not taken into account Sri Lanka's own strategic compulsions and internal constraints. So what about Sri Lanka itself?

SRI LANKA

Strategic Constraints. The upper middle class aristocracy who presently rule Sri Lanka will like to keep Sri Lanka free from becoming an arena of big power rivalry. One pre requisite for such a stake would be the part of apparent neutrality. Granting of military bases in Trincomalee directly to the USA or through another surrogate like Pakistan is sure to invite the wrath of the Soviet Union, and the displeasure of even China and other socialist

countries. Logical military consequences of such an attitude are likely to be the targeting of Sri Lanka by ICBM/MRBMS of these countries; deployment of Russian Navy close to the Sri Lanka coasts; putting up their client states in the adversary stance to Sri Lanka; and aiding and abetting internal subversion by either Tamil militant groups or JVP. Besides these daunting strategic constraints there are internal pressures which will equally influence the course of policy.

INTERNAL PRESSURES

The first reality to be taken into account in the internal scenario of Sri Lanka is the overwhelming predominance of the people of Sinhalese origin (over 84 percent) whose appetite for total domination over economic, political, social and military spheres in Sri Lanka has been progressively whetted by the dynamics of democracy and the philosophy of a state which will not decentralise resources to smaller segments of their society in order to enable them to live in reasonable prosperity and dignity. The second reality is the control of the state apparatus and economy by an oligarchy which is west oriented and intends to keep the country that way so as to keep the maximum gains of its prosperity to itself. This has given rise to such militant groups as the JVP which are a peculiar mixture of obscurantist ethos of religion mixed with their own brand of socialism. They would like to overthrow the existing aristocratic set up and establish instead a Sinhalese dominated socialistic society. The third reality is the existence of a compact group of Tamils in the Northern and Eastern regions (about 12 percent of the whole but well over 70 percent in these regions). The fourth reality is the emergence of terrorism with the availability of tools of electronics for communication and cohesion and semi automatic weapons for effective coercion has become capable of making any government attentive to its voice and demands.

All these realities will, or atleast ought to, press for a rational solution which will have to be just and fair. For no group or segment can hope to survive for long without moral base. This line of thought would seem to lead to small, homogenous, semi autonomous states which will stick together as a nation for the sake of their own survival. Therefore the answer to Sri Lankas' problems is not offering bases to any block but remaining non aligned internationally and federal internally.

Besides exclusive rights to a port in a foreign country may be as ticklish as a mistress abroad ie not good for peace and prosperity and highly embarrassing most of the time. So what are the implications of exclusive rights to Trincomalee harbour.

EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS IN TRINCOMALEE

The issue of exclusive or even priority rights over the Sri Lanka blue

water port of Trincomalee raises a host of embarrassing questions. What are the implications of exclusive or priority rights? Does it mean that the Sri Lankan Government will jointly develop dry and wet dock yard facilities in Trincomalee, for only extremely inadequate ones exist presently? Will then the revenues be sent to India? If no, then is there much economic wisdom in such an investment? If there is no economic wisdom in such an investment does it have any strategic wisdom? If the latter is conceded then does it mean that India will have the veto rights to debar calling, repair and refuelling facilities to what it may consider nations hostile to it? Will Sri Lanka accede to such an infringement on its sovereignty? Will other nations concur with such an arrangement? Can India impose its will by military means by itself should some powerful nation such as USA or England or France force the issue? If no, then will it seek Soviet help to do so? Will that not make a hash of our non aligned protestations? These and many other barbed questions and potentially explosive situations will have to be contemplated and faced in this case. Not a very pleasant and profitable exercise by any stretch of imagination.

DENIAL OF HOSTILE PROPAGANDA BASE

The denial of propaganda hostile to India was aimed at primarily Voice of America and Radio Israel. It is to be seriously questioned whether establishing one's military presence in Sri Lanka is the best and the most cost effective way of countering those hostile broadcasts. After all did not the BBC with its accurate reporting and rational interpretation of events successfully counter the brilliant Dr Goebbel's propaganda barrage? All the German and the Japanese broadcasting could not alter the fact of their atrocities on the ground. Nearer home, what was the net achievement of Radio Pakistan's and All India Radio's virulent lampoons and exaggerations which they ceased after the 1971 war? Next, the radio being a phenomenon of physics and the satellites today being nearly unassailable relay, a country like USA or Israel wishing to convey their inanities to Indians or the Sri Lankans can still do so with a wee bit more of application of money and technology. Finally, the way to end hostile propaganda is to eliminate the causes of it. Sri Lanka may have been provoked to do so by our Tamil Nadu Government's sympathetic attitude to Sri Lankan Tamils. Once the basic issue is resolved and the feeling is eased, the need for hostile propaganda also ceases. All told, this ought to have been the last reason to provoke a military campaign.

TRINCOMALEE OIL FARM

Yet another feature of the accord which is likely to be detrimental to India's interests is an agreement reached to update the facilities of the Trincomalee Oil Farm as a Joint Indo-Sri Lanka venture. A creation of the British in 1930, it has 101 storage tanks each of 10,000 metric tonnes capacity.

Of these, only 15 are being used for FOL excluding petrol by Sri Lanka for their domestic consumption.

The questions that arise are many. Do we really need to go in for improving upon and updating the various facilities available in the oil farm? What will be the cost of repairing and making this enterprise a commercially viable venture? What will be India's share in it? If the thought is to ensure availability of adequate refuelling facilities for own naval ships, then the existing arrangements appear to be adequate. Improving upon the available facilities would make it attractive enough for the superpowers to move in, thereby negating the very purpose of the accord.

THE SIXTH ARGUMENT

The sixth and presumably the clinching argument in favour of our intervention is that a Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka may provoke a separatist and irredentist movement in Tamil Nadu which will aim at unifying the long separated Tamil people together. This thesis ignores a host of ground realities such as defence, viability of economic structure, regional and linguistic differences (Yes, please! its no inadvertent error). Foremost amongst all these realities is the economic reality. Economic structure of Tamil Nadu is inextricably connected with the rest of India. Much of their food supply and coal, all of their oil, and iron ore, a great deal of power, and even water comes from the rest of India. The Tamil finds unrestricted employment in the huge Indian subcontinent and because of his diligence and intellectual application does extremely well for himself. Its a common sight to see them comfortably occupying all kind of jobs in every part of India. The finished goods of the industries of Tamil Nadu find market in regions to its North and West. The Gods they believe and the spiritual ethos which pervades most of the Tamil populace emanates from Ayodhya, Kashi, Vrindavan, Dwarka, Badri Nath, Kedar Nath, Amar Nath, and even Aligarh and Deoband. The communication systems all course along up and down the rest of India.

From the defence point of view, how secure will be the hypothetical state enjoining the two segments of Tamil people divided by a sea? What kind of effort will such a state require to structure a reasonable defence against a hypothetical aggression from India (less Tamil Nadu) and Sri Lanka? How big Army, Navy and Air Force? What will it cost?

Language and religion may be the binding forces provided the other realities do not jinx the issue. In this case it would not seem to be so. Otherwise, what would account for the Punjabis of Pakistan who could not live together inspite of Common language and culture and the Pakistanis of East and West who could not stay united despite the commonality of religion. On the other hand, the Canadians stay cohesively, speaking French and English;

the Swiss speaking German, French, Italian and a few more languages; Britain survives and prospers with cultural ideosyncracies of the English, Irish and Scots; nearer home Singapore sets another great example in harmonious blending of varied peoples and cultures. At any rate the Tamil spoken by the Sri Lankan Tamils (Sen Tamil) is fairly varied than the mainland Tamils.

Unless in a fit of amnesia and perverse pique, it is impossible for a citizen of Tamil Nadu to imagine himself existing separated from the rest of India and in a hostile stance while being united as part of the Northern and Eastern districts of Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. It will need a psychedelic imagination to accept such a situation which the ground realities must tear asunder as happened in the case of Pakistan.

SUMMING UP

The foregoing analysis would seem to suggest that our Sri Lankan adventure may have to be reviewed, recast and trimmed with clear eyed perceptions. Our military and political strategists should go through the process of analysing the pros and cons of the step with cold and detached logic that the affairs of state demand. Only then perhaps the most logical and economic answer to the baffling conundrum will slowly emerge. It may well imply withdrawal of mainforce to the mainland persuading Sri Lanka and the Tamils to handle their problems with the wisdom that President Jeyawardene seems to be displaying in his pronouncements lately. They may be capable of resolving it in due course.