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## **BILATERAL IMPEDIMENTS TO SAARC : THE INDO-SRI LANKA CRISIS OVER IPKF WITHDRAWAL**

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was born amidst lot of skepticism over its prospects. The reasons are not far to seek and are rooted in the history of inter-state relations in the region which have been bedeviled by sharp political dissensions, chronic tensions, proverbial mistrusts and occasional hostilities. Despite a shared political commitment to cooperate and despite reasonable progress made in institutionalizing the process of regional cooperation the member-states of SAARC have remained more concerned over issues in their bilateral relations than programmes and activities of SAARC. The continuing presence of lingering bilateral problems—most of them involving India in one way or other—has in effect overshadowed whatever progress could have been made so far, or more importantly, contributed to a systematic erosion of confidence in SAARC as a viable institution.

The fact that India is at the centre of nearly all outstanding problems and discords in the complex matrix of bilateral relations in the region is well-known and is also a part of the geo-political reality of the region. Apart from its monumental size and extremely disparate power possession, perception and posture<sup>1</sup>, the fact that matters is that India is the only country that has borders—land or

1. See for details, Iftekharuzzaman, "Changing Global Scenario : Challenges for Bangladesh", Seminar Paper, BISS, 10 June 1989.

otherwise—with all other six countries while no two of the rest share frontiers with each other. This geo-political configuration proffers India elaborate paraphernalia of leverages over its smaller neighbours most of which remain endemically vulnerable due as much to their domestic politico-economic underdevelopment, as to Indian maneuvers<sup>2</sup>. Whether it is unresolved problems of territory and boundary ; economic, lingering trade and transit disputes ; long-standing issues of resource sharing or unresolved ethno-religious conflicts, the Indian involvement is almost universal. Indo-Pakistan relations continue to be troubled despite recent gestures of goodwill at both ends and the main issues of discord remain unresolved with the Kashmir problem as the 'dormant volcano'. Other irritants include the nuclear controversy and mutual allegation of fomenting troubles in each other's territory by supporting separatists or terrorists. In Indo-Bangladesh relations the main outstanding issues are water sharing, Tin Bigha and Indian support to Bangladeshi dissidents including Tribals of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Crisis over trade and transit has overshadowed other irritants in Indo-Nepal relations. India and Sri Lanka have been at serious odds in recent periods over the former's role in the island country's ethnic problem. Beyond Indo-centric problems, there are also at least two outstanding issues of no less significance in relation between Bangladesh and Pakistan, namely sharing of assets and repatriation of stranded Pakistanis.

In such a complex scenario a conventional approach to regionalism would have denied SAARC any possibility of success, so that what was opted for came to be known as a 'sanitized approach' of keeping the process of regional cooperation separate from the 'bilateral and contentious' issues. But evidently enough, the juxtaposition of SAARC with the multiplicity of bilateral problems in this 'region of mistrust' has not been easy and as recent events have shown, the attempt to keep SAARC immune from bilateral

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2. *Ibid.*

problems have been largely abortive. Not only that, the process of cooperation has indeed been facing the most severe challenges from these bilateral problems. The present paper is an attempt at examining the impact of the Indo-Sri Lankan crisis over the SAARC process, particularly in the context of the postponement of the seventh session of the Council of Ministers. Why has Sri Lanka been adopting a 'boycott diplomacy' *vis-a-vis* SAARC? Could there be any other approach in using SAARC as an instrument for helping reduce bilateral tensions? What are the various dimensions of the controversy over IPKF withdrawal? How can the intransigence at both ends be analyzed or what were their compulsions for the same? What after all, may be the implication of this bilateral impediment in the SAARC context? These are among the questions raised in this paper.

### **Sri Lanka and SAARC : Boycott Diplomacy**

Sri Lanka, it is widely believed, has relatively less interest in SAARC. It was reported at one stage that it expressed the willingness to join ASEAN, and there is a notion that it aligns itself more to the Southeast Asian region than to South Asia. Notwithstanding a dilemma of this nature—and it may be debatable—Sri Lanka has been involved in the SAARC process with clearly manifested political will and commitment ever since the initiative was launched by Bangladesh. Indeed, Sri Lanka was the first country to have hosted any SAARC meeting. The first meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries met for the first time in Colombo on 21-25 April 1981 to discuss the Working Paper on SAARC circulated by Bangladesh. The meeting also set up study groups on five areas of cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the first meeting of the Committee of the Whole was also convened by Sri Lanka in Colombo on 31 August-2 September of the same year in which thirteen areas of cooperation were

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3, Iftekharuzzaman, *The SAARC in Progress : A Hesitant Course of South Asian Transition*, BIISS Paper no 7, January 1988, pp. 21-22.

recommended<sup>4</sup>. Sri Lankan interest in and expectation of SAARC continued to rise along with the process of institutionalization of regional cooperation. In the first meeting of the SAARC Foreign Ministers, held in New Delhi on 1 August 1983 the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister indicated his country's expectation of SAARC by saying that the factors that "had hitherto retarded movement towards regional collaboration..... had taken a heavy toll in deep-rooted attitudes and the case for regional cooperation had to be argued and won. The case has now been won; we stand poised to launch ourselves upon a journey of regional interaction based on the promise of future rather than the legacy of the past."<sup>5</sup> At the Villingili (Maldives) meeting the following year he said that he had "no doubt that we are witnessing the dawn of a new era of friendship, understanding, trust and cooperation in South Asia ..... in securing for all our peoples social and economic progress in regional harmony and mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>6</sup>

Then came the anti-climax. By 1985 with the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka complicated in all directions and with growing involvement of India in the problem<sup>7</sup>, Sri Lanka's main foreign policy concern turned out to be its relation with India. Colombo's ties with New Delhi, particularly its security aspect pre-occupied the Sri Lankan mind.<sup>8</sup> It seemed that from such a preoccupation Sri Lanka began to view SAARC as a bargaining chip in its relation with India.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Quoted in Iftekharuzzaman, "SARC : A Jolt and an Early Warning from Sri Lanka", *Bangladesh Observer*, 14 May 1985.

6. *Ibid.*

7. For detailed discussion on the subject see, Mahbubur Rahman, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka : Future Dimensions", *BISS Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1986, Iftekharuzzaman and Humayun Kabir, "The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement : An Assessment", *BISS Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1987, Abdur Rob Khan, *Strategic Aspects of Indo-Sri Lanka Relations*, BISS Papers no 4, June 1986.

8. See, *ASEAN Experiences of Regional and Inter-regional Cooperation : Relevance for SAARC*, BISS, 1988, pp. 89-90.

Colombo was certainly aware of the fact that by signing the SAARC Charter it had a commitment like all other member states to keep bilateral problems separate from the SAARC process. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka made its first attempt to play a SAARC card way back in 1985 on the eve of the third meeting of the Foreign Ministers in Thimpu. In the context of rising regional expectation over the new association Sri Lanka threatened to boycott the Thimpu meeting in protest against a comment made by the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs in which Sri Lankan handling of the unrest between majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils was described as "deplorable, barbaric, cruel and inhuman".<sup>9</sup> Sri Lanka treated this to be an interference in its internal affairs and did not want to join "a club where a big member bullied the small." Colombo was eventually persuaded to join and the Thimpu meeting was saved. But the message from the apparently abortive use of SAARC as a trade-off was not without significance. It was a clear manifestation of the complicated and delicate nature of the SAARC process. It was easy—and clearly not without reason—to set the provision of bilateral issues keeping apart, but it was much more difficult to draw the line. To be pragmatic, bilateral issues are bound to influence multilateral proceedings. SAARC after all is a forum of states that essentially interact bilaterally in a common neighbourhood, and it is natural that the mood at the bilateral level would influence the same at the multilateral level.

On a more positive note, as distinct from Sri Lankan boycott diplomacy, some of the other member states have indeed attempted—to an extent successfully—to utilize the SAARC forum in promoting some of their bilateral interests. One notable aspect of SAARC is the unprecedentedly increased frequency of mutual contacts at official and political levels. It has been observed, significantly enough, that on nearly all these occasions the leaders and officials at various levels have the opportunity to exchange views on

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9. Quoted in Iftekharuzzaman, "SARC : A Jolt . . .", *op. cit.*

matters of common concern, not-too rarely of the bilateral or contentious nature. This happened in the Dhaka summit of 1985 and was followed up during nearly all subsequent major events. At Dhaka the member states decided during their informal meetings to expand their cooperation in combating terrorism—an area which is not merely a complex issue more of political than socio-economic and non-controversial nature, but also a problem basically at the bilateral levels. Sri Lanka incidentally was among the states which were most affected by the scourge of terrorism. Considering the nature and state of inter-state relations in the region very few people at that stage would have given a chance to the prospect of cooperation on terrorism. Belying all doubts, however, a regional convention on suppression of terrorism has been effective since 1988.

On a closer focus, matters of directly bilateral nature were also discussed between member-states during various SAARC occasions. Some of these opened the possibilities of significant breakthroughs and have become items of continued follow-up actions and deliberations within or outside the SAARC forum. The issues *per se* have in most cases not been resolved, but the fact that openings were made seems to be worth the recognition. Such issues include the the sharing of water resources between Bangladesh and India, Indo-Pakistan controversy over the nuclear issue, and the Indo-Sri Lankan problem. Particularly notable were the bilateral consultations between India and Pakistan during the fourth Summit which not only raised the hopes of a forthcoming rapprochement between the two traditional rivals, but also paved the way for some important agreements to be signed subsequently.

As for Sri Lanka also, it appears that there has until recently been an intent to make progress on its problems with India through the use of SAARC forum although in the guise of a 'boycott diplomacy'. On the eve of the third session of the Council of Ministers held in New Delhi, once again arose the possibility of Sri Lankan staying away on the ground of India's controversial air-lifting of relief

materials to north-east Sri Lanka. As a part of Sri Lankan efforts to offset the humiliation caused by what was called a "naked violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty and territorial integrity"<sup>10</sup> Sri Lanka earlier called upon the SAARC Secretary General to convene a special meeting of the association, although Colombo knew it very well that he was not mandated to do so. Ironically enough, at the stage of establishment of the Secretariat only a few months before the event, Sri Lanka took the most hard-line approach—along with India—against assigning any substantive power to the Secretary General. The reason apparently was an inhibition against what was viewed as creation of a supra-national authority.<sup>11</sup> Sri Lanka subsequently joined the Council meeting wherein the Sri Lankan delegation not only made a pointed reference to the bilateral problems between Colombo and New Delhi but also called for signing a SAARC convention that would bind member-states together by a solemn declaration to respect one another's independence and territorial integrity by refraining from any acts of aggression, interference, violence and oppression.<sup>12</sup> The issue was not directly discussed, but the Sri Lankan concern certainly defined the mood of the meeting, as at least two other delegations—Bangladesh and Pakistan—made references to the event, indirectly by pointing to the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of each other as embodied in the UN and SAARC Charters. Furthermore, the fact that following bilateral discussions between Sri Lanka and India even during the Council meeting, the two sides reportedly emerged with a modicum for diffusing the tension for the moment, showed the importance of the association as a platform that may contribute, even though indirectly, to resolve bilateral problems. The problem between Sri Lanka and India like most other bilateral problems in the region are much deeper in roots

10. See for details, Iftekhharuzzaman and Humayun Kabir, *op. cit.*

11. For divergent views of member states on the role and functions of SAARC Secretariat, see, *ASEAN Experiences...*, pp. 62-3.

12. Statement of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister to the Third Session of SAARC Council of Ministers, New Delhi, 1986.

and complex in dimension and it is not surprising that it continues two years after the signing of a controversial peace accord.<sup>13</sup> As the two sides remained embroiled in discord, pressure on Sri Lanka as the afflicted party to resolve it mounted. Particularly disquieting was the worsening domestic political scenario. In a bid to find a way out Sri Lankan President intended to achieve an early withdrawal of IPKF and get a deadline once again taking recourse to its boycott diplomacy involving SAARC.

### The IPKF Jolt

Thus came the severe-most of setback the association has ever suffered. The Indo-Sri Lankan crisis over IPKF withdrawal from Sri Lanka has provided it. The eleventh session of SAARC Council of Ministers scheduled to be held in Islamabad on 1-2 July was postponed due to Sri Lanka's decision to stay away because of New Delhi's refusal to withdraw its troops before 29 July, the second anniversary of the IPKF presence in Sri Lanka. The decision to postpone the meetings was taken following the failure of intensive diplomatic and even highest political level efforts to persuade Sri Lanka to join. Sri Lanka justified its boycott by arguing that the "objectives of SAARC could not be achieved unless its member-states agree not to interfere in the affairs of other members and take undue advantage of their size and predominance".<sup>14</sup>

With Sri Lanka firm in its decision to boycott, there was little that could be done but to postpone it. Indeed, there were three possible scenarios: Firstly, to successfully persuade Sri Lanka to come to Islamabad and hold the meeting which would have afforded Sri Lanka, and Nepal—which has also been passing through deepest of crisis in its relation with India—to raise their problems with India in

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13. See for details on the agreement, *The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, 1987.

14. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Vijaratne's letter to his Pakistani counterpart, quoted in *The Muslim* (Islamabad), 27 June, 1989.



the SAARC forum in one way or another. Nepal had indeed gone to Islamabad with the intention of using the opportunity to raise its concerns in this regional forum. Sri Lanka, it may be remembered, did so in the past with or without much impact on the issues *per se*, but certainly adding to the justifications for opening political dimensions of cooperation under SAARC. This time a SAARC focus on so-called bilateral and contentious issues—even if most innocuously—would have made a difference. There was a possibility of nearly all other states having lined up one way or other in favour of both Nepal and Sri Lanka adding to India's international embarrassment. India was quite conscious of this possibility and indeed Indian media reports and comments were practically alerting the South Block about it for some time. Sri Lanka apparently considered this to be too little a gain and opted for absents from the meeting and thereby also saved India of the possible embarrassment and deprived itself and Nepal of what could constitute a meaningful forum to put pressure on India. *Nota bene*, Sri Lanka must be knowing fully well that SAARC or no SAARC, India's decision was going to be influenced very little by any factor other than its own calculations.

It may be argued also that Pakistan preferred to avoid being host to such embarrassment to India at a time when its relation with New Delhi was of no less significance than to save SAARC from jeopardy. Significantly enough, Pakistan Prime Minister refrained from intervening which many thought might have helped ease the situation. On the other hand, the Pakistan Foreign Secretary talked to his Indian counterpart at least thrice before the latter had left for Islamabad and this was an exception. Pakistan has been criticized for what has been described as its failure as the SAARC Chairman to "live upto the expectation of the smaller countries ..... ( and ) remaining mum over the hegemonistic trends and high-handedness of India which jeopardized the very existence of the SAARC forum".<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, of course, during Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Islamabad

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15. *The Nation*, (Lahore), 30 June 1989.

Pakistan reportedly expressed some concern over the situation, but the damage to SAARC was already done by that time. It is not too speculative to suggest that Indian concern was to be taken care of by Islamabad in any decision to be taken at the time of the crisis.

The second possible scenario was to go ahead with the meeting even with Sri Lanka staying out. Reference was made to article 7 of the SAARC Rules of Procedure which provides that a meeting could be opened with the presence of five members. But since the Charter provides that any decision has to be reached on the basis of unanimity, the Sri Lankan absence would in any case have invalidated any proceedings. More importantly, such holding of the session would have set a precedence of a small nation being left out in the pretext of the provision that bilateral issues are not discussed in SAARC.

The third possibility was to postpone the meeting and to go for further diplomatic moves towards an accommodative solution. This was what was opted for, which by all indications at the cost of an embarrassment for the association manifested the shared concern of fellow member states *vis-a-vis* the difficulties facing Sri Lanka.

The postponement of the meeting has certainly jolted the process of cooperation in South Asia. Regular activities of the association under the Integrated Programme of Action and other medium and short-term programmes would probably go on parallel with the process of negotiation. The episode has nevertheless stressed the difficulties in sustaining regional cooperation if it is not supported by a reasonable degree of political understanding among partners. Cooperation between neighbours in regional context does not, of course, presuppose a total absence of outstanding bilateral issues and indeed experience from other regional associations suggest that success in regionalism creates conditions congenial to improvement of bilateral relations. What is warranted is a spirit of mutual accommodation. But states at loggerheads at bilateral levels on political and/or other issues can hardly be expected to make

much progress in a process of cooperation for social and economic development. What is at stake is the future of SAARC which agreeably enough, despite formidable challenges has developed into a viable and promising institution. It is in the greater interest of the region that the session should be re-convened, the need for which is underscored by the fact that Colombo is scheduled to host the next summit and that it has already indicated that it would not do so with foreign troops present in the country.

The postponement of the meeting has also proffered an occasion to reconsider the implications of India's coercive posture *vis-a-vis* the smaller neighbours. If the Sri Lankan boycott was the immediate reason for the postponement it is certainly the overbearing intransigence of India particularly in recent times which has set the stage. With the damage already caused to the SAARC process some negotiation was reportedly going on between Sri Lanka and India. And at the eleventh hour an understanding was reached under which India withdrew some of its troops before the Sri Lankan deadline. The content and conditionalities of such withdrawal were not known, but it was clear that the withdrawal was no more than symbolic, if anything, designed as a face-saving formula for New Delhi to avoid being identified as having forcefully stationed its troops in a small and weak neighbour and for Colombo to have a feeling of achieving some progress. It also marked an opening for a new phase of negotiation instead of direct confrontation over the complex issue. The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister proceeded to New Delhi to evidently negotiate terms of phased withdrawal. Colombo's demand for ending of IPKF operations against LTTE with whom it has been holding dialogue also came up for negotiation. Two other basic Sri Lankan demands were not however, referred to in the negotiation. These were Premadasa's contention of himself as the Commander-in-Chief of the IPKF so long as it stayed in Sri Lanka, and secondly a repeated Sri Lankan official demand that the Indian troops should remain in barracks after the deadline of 29 July.

Dilogue continued and diplomats shuttled between Colombo and New Delhi with the objective of striking a compromise formula to improve relations between the two. The focus of negotiations was on the linkage of a phased withdrawal with devolution of power in the north-east and what New Delhi viewed as ensuring of security of Tamils.

In the meantime, the root of the whole crisis, namely the ethnic conflicts in the island country remained far from resolved. It is significant to note that in a toughly-worded letter to Premadasa, Rajiv said that India had the right to keep its troops in Sri Lanka until the two countries' agreement on settling the Tamil rebellion in the island was fulfilled. The Indian Prime Minister indeed defined the nature of New Delhi's high-handedness by saying further that *if discussions on the withdrawal of the 46,000 Indian troops were not acceptable India would decide on the terms of their withdrawal unilaterally* (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

The issue, clearly enough, is not the circumstances in which India undertook its controversial peace-keeping operation with massive troop deployment, but that New Delhi had been flatly refusing to pull out its army when asked to do so by the lawfully constituted authority of the country and under the relevant provision of the agreement that matters. The Indo-Sri Lanka agreement does not specifically define the tenure of stay nor the terms of withdrawal of the IPKF. Article 2.16 (c) of the agreement provides that "in the event that the Government of Sri Lanka requests the Government of India to afford military assistance to implement these proposals (agreed between the two sides), the Government of India will cooperate by giving to the Government of Sri Lanka *such military assistance as and when requested* (emphasis added)." The Annexure to the Agreement further laid down that "Prime Minister of India and the President of Sri Lanka also agree that . . . . an Indian Peace-keeping contingent may be *invited by the President*

16. *Bangladesh Observer*, (Dhaka), 13 July 1989.

of Sri Lanka to guarantee and enforce the cessation of hostilities, if so required" (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> It does, therefore, indicate, as also claimed by Sri Lanka, that as the authority to invite, the Sri Lankan President retains the prerogative of deciding the tenure of IPKF presence. Now refusing to comply with the Sri Lankan request to withdraw, India is alleged not only of violating the agreement itself but also challenging the sovereignty of the island state. Indian intransigence at bilateral level has pushed a tiny disadvantaged neighbour to a desperate situation and thereby jeopardized the fledgling process of cooperation in a troubled region.

Meanwhile, the episode has provided a new edge to the controversy over Indian role in Sri Lankan ethnic crisis which reached a stalemate with continued IPKF presence only adding to the obstacles against a breakthrough. India rejected Premadasa's call for pullout by insisting that any withdrawal should be conditional upon improvement of the law and order situation and devolution of power to the provincial government in the northeast region. Sri Lanka for its part maintained that "the only condition on which IPKF was invited to Sri Lanka and the only condition that should be satisfied for the withdrawal of the IPKF is the decision of the President of Sri Lanka".<sup>18</sup> The condition for withdrawal from Sri Lankan perspective was therefore, satisfied with the request for withdrawal made by Premadasa. In the heat of the tension Colombo acted with extraordinary firmness. A Government Minister said that patriotic Sri Lankans will "fight to the last man" if India tried to impose its peace-keeping force on the country.<sup>19</sup> He further said that India should not consider Sri Lanka a weak and small country that could be easily suppressed. President Premadasa himself blamed India of creating chaos in his country, and said, "I do not expect

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17. See, *The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, op. cit.*

18. A Spokesman of the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry, quoted in, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, (Calcutta), 16 June, 1989.

19. Quoted in *The Dawn*, (Karachi), 30 June, 1989.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to dictate terms to us and attract international condemnation of a big country bullying a small neighbour.”<sup>20</sup>

War of words apart, the row over IPKF withdrawal had pushed relations between the two countries to a very low level. It is possible to link the intransigence of the two sides with domestic political situations in their respective countries. Premadasa's objectives seemed to include an attempt to divert the people's attention from other pressing domestic problems including wildcat strikes and boycott campaigns despite the re-imposition of the state of emergency and worsening economic situation leading to mounting anti-government feeling in the country.

Premadasa's dilemmas were obvious. It is not without significance that his strong call for the withdrawal came in the wake of the talks between his Government and the LTTE. The fallout of this dialogue is to be viewed as circumventing not only New Delhi but also the moderate Tamils. Premadasa appeared to be opting for sacrificing these latter groups represented by the EPRLF-led combine which incidentally controls the north-eastern provincial council. Premadasa's strong position may indeed be viewed as a part of a trade-off between his government and the LTTE which has agreed to the cessation of hostilities presumably in exchange for a possible IPKF withdrawal. To that extent, of course, he was certainly going for a risky game. The eventuality of Tigers resuming hostilities following a possible IPKF withdrawal cannot be ruled out so easily. Whether or not the LTTE was to be blamed for the killings that continued including prominent moderate leaders, the fact that they clearly indicated their unwillingness to surrender arms on the plea of retaining "bargaining power"<sup>21</sup> begs serious concern on the part of Premadasa. Significantly also, although LTTE

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20. President Ranasinghe Premadasa, quoted in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 June, 1989.

21. *The Muslim*, 28 June 1989.

has been talking of its preparedness to participate in a political process of resolution of the crisis, it has never yet given up its demand for a separate independent Tamil state in the north-east. And the fact remains that in the ultimate analysis neutralization of LTTE continues to be the *sine qua non* for any long-term solution to the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka. Premadasa should have been aware of it, but he was also certainly acting from a desperate situation from which he presumably opted to take the chance. The President may have been counting on a possibility that LTTE may not go back to its fury of two years ago if he can really manage to get the the IPKF out and if the LTTE is not provoked too much by the JVP, the militancy of which may also erode subsequent upon Indian withdrawal. JVP militancy, as it is well-known, has been thriving as much on anti-Indianism as on Sinhala chauvinism. Premadasa's objectives appear to include, therefore, taking the wind out of sails of JVP extremists by adopting the posture of a super-nationalist and to possibly monopolize the credit for eventual withdrawal.

Pramadasa's challenges are, however, more complex and include the continuing disagreements and indeed mutual hatred between the LTTE on the one hand and the moderate Tamil groups on the other. The question that looms large is what would be the terms of next trade-off between the LTTE and the government in case of an IPKF withdrawal. If LTTE's demand for separate Tamil state is to be foregone in exchange for the establishment of an LTTE government in the north and east, or at least in the east, (the possibility of which is not ruled out as indicated *inter alia*, by the postponement of the referendum for merger) what would be the fate of the incumbent government, particularly the moderate Tamil groups? The Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) urged India not to withdraw as this they say would leave the Tamil people in the island nation "unprotected".<sup>22</sup> The moderates indeed fear of mass genocide of Tamils by the Sinhalese

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22. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 June 1989.

as was the case during the 1987 aerial bombings—this time the Sinhalese to be joined by LTTE. The scenario is rendered further complex by the reported large-scale recruitment of citizens' volunteer brigade, to fight the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE in the event of a pullout of the IPKF. About four thousand conscripts were being trained with IPKF assistance, many of them were also taken reportedly to India for the same purpose.<sup>23</sup> The moderate groups including the EPRLF, the ruling party in the north-east sought Indian assistance to "declare and independent sovereign state of the Tamil speaking people" if the IPKF were withdrawn before "Tamils feel safe and secure in their own land".<sup>24</sup>

This complex scenario defines the leverages in India's hands which is further strengthened by reported discontent within senior officials of the Sri Lankan army over the way the government, particularly the official media turned anti-Indian since the talk between the LTTE and the government began. It is reported that these officials did not like the row between Colombo and New Delhi at a time when cooperation between the two armies has been what they say "very high".<sup>25</sup> Agreeably enough, the mainstream of the Sri Lankan army may be favouring early withdrawal, because if not for anything else, the IPKF presence has caused embarrassing erosion of its *locus standi*. But the possibility of sharper polarization within the army leading to further complications in internal security situation is not ruled out.

On the part of India, beside its stated preconditions like devolution of effective power and ensuring of security for the Tamils as well as unity and integrity of the island country, the rule of the thumb appears to be to preserve the long-term gains it has achieved as a result of the 1987 agreement, namely, to keep Sri Lanka exclusively under New Delhi's strategic and political

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23. *Ibid*, 26 June 1989.

24. *Ibid*, 4 July 1989.

25. *Ibid*, 26 June 1989.



control.<sup>26</sup> In an over-stretched show of power in the midst of the crisis New Delhi decided to hold a high-profile naval sea exercise close to the Sri Lankan coasts, involving India's latest aircraft carrier British-built INS Virat equipped with vertical take-off sea carrier fighters, combat helicopters, missiles and sophisticated electronic warfare equipments.<sup>27</sup> Beside the psychological pressure addressed towards Colombo, such actions are also indicative of India's vigilance to ensure—as laid down by the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement—that developments in and around Sri Lanka cannot be prejudicial to Indian interests. To that extent, it would be difficult under any foreseeable turnout of events to anticipate a *total* withdrawal of its troops in the immediate future. India would, of course, by all means like to go for a phased withdrawal of a substantial portion of the IPKF, and save itself from widespread international embarrassment. Consider that Sri Lanka is different from even Afghanistan and Vietnam to the extent that unlike in case of the IPKF, foreign military presence in those cases were backed by—ostensively though—endorsement of the incumbent governments.

In terms of atrocities, however, the IPKF, by available indicators, does not appear to have any qualms in following the footsteps of the Americans in Mai Lai. Fifty-one unarmed civilian Tamils including women and children were brutally massacred and hundreds of their houses and shops burnt in retaliation against an attack by LTTE which claimed the lives of seven Indian soldiers.<sup>28</sup> Ironically enough, ensuring of safety and security of the Tamil population are the main reasons that New Delhi claims to be behind its continuing military presence in the island country against the will of Colombo. The incident clearly demonstrated not only the level of Indian hatred against the Tamil militants but also the degree of increasingly

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26. For a discussion on the political and strategic gains of India from the agreement see, Iftekhharuzzaman and Humayun Kabir, *op. cit.*

27. *Bangladesh Observer*, 20 July 1989.

28. Independent report quoted by BBC published in *Bangladesh Observer*, 12 August, 1989.

atrocious IPKF mistrust against the civilian Tamils which, if anything, indicate yet another dimension of the complexity of the crisis.

In any case, certain degree of Indian military presence in Sri Lanka is likely to remain for some time to come. The withdrawal, India says, must be preceded by "devolution of effective powers to the provincial council and the creation of a credible and effective law and order machinery in the north-eastern province so the Tamils could live with safety and security and were guaranteed their democratic rights within a united Sri Lanka".<sup>29</sup> Rajiv made it clear that the withdrawal of the IPKF depended upon *full implementation* of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord.<sup>30</sup> India knows it well, so does anybody aware of the dynamics of the Tamil problem that these are too remote objectives to be achieved with or without the IPKF.

Indian attitude to the whole issue was rendered clear in the official New Delhi reaction to the agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government over ending of hostilities which was quickly rejected as useless. One senior official commented, "the Tigers and Sri Lankans are not really engaged in hostilities, so for the Tigers to say that they have converted their cease-fire into a cessation of hostilities is meaningless".<sup>31</sup> He further added significantly enough, "*until the IPKF decides to cease hostilities their agreement does not mean much.*" This not only testified to Sri Lankan allegation of New Delhi's involvement in creating chaos in the island country, but also suggested clearly that cessation of hostilities in Sri Lanka is a function of Indian goodwill. There were indeed independent reports suggesting the involvement of the Indian intelligence agency, RAW in the recent violences and unrests within Sri Lanka, which was also viewed as an attempt to oust Premadasa from power.<sup>32</sup> Possibility of a military coup to replace the present government in

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29. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 June 1989.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *The Muslim*, 30 June 1989.

32. *Gemini Report*, Quoted in *Bangladesh Observer*, 26 July 1989,

Colombo was also speculated.<sup>33</sup> India of course was not at all comfortable that Premadasa was not merely holding talks with the LTTE but also placed his cards heavily on the group. The Indian objective in any event is, therefore, to extend its military presence in Sri Lanka in the pretext of establishment of peace.

It should be noted further that for complicating the imbroglio New Delhi has itself to blame to a great extent. That Premadasa was defiant to the Indian military presence in Sri Lanka was made abundantly clear by his being absent from the ceremony where the accord was signed. Subsequently, on his election as President with the manifesto for the IPKF pullout New Delhi should have made closer assessment of his priorities and concerns and try to arrive at a personal rapprochement aiming at an accommodative resolution. Instead, New Delhi took him for granted with all self-confidence which as of now has proved counterproductive. The IPKF, India knows pretty well, has to be eventually pulled out as already mentioned, even if not totally. But the way the situation has been developing suggests that Indian troops will take longer to leave than could be expected. Rajiv's firmness may also have been a part of his efforts to divert his people's attention from pressing domestic problems on the eve of the forthcoming Lok Shabha polls. And little progress over the "symbolic withdrawal" and beyond reiteration of preparedness for phased withdrawal can be expected before the end of the year. A compromise under a small neighbour's terms may be viewed by Rajiv's hard-line strategists as being muddled in the face. The opposition political parties have already been strongly critical of Rajiv's Sri Lanka policy, The BJP led by former Foreign Minister A.B. Vajpayee said it was "a blunder of major proportions" to have trained, armed and financially assisted the LTTE and then to have placed all options on the group.<sup>34</sup> Now, bringing the IPKF home under Sri

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33. *US Defense and Foreign Affairs Weekly*, 10 July, 1989 quoted in *Bangladesh Observer*, 27 July 1989.

34. *The Dawn*, 13 June 1989.

Lankan pressure prompted apparently by LTTE would open Rajiv to opposition charges that he further wasted nearly thousand lives without any gains.

Rajiv is quite aware of his need to balance the domestic pressures. On his return from a short trip to Pakistan during which the Pakistan President blasted what he said India's 'hegemonic designs' Rajiv demonstrated New Delhi's unpreparedness either to withdraw in any short period or to be moved by any pressure from any quarter, by defending the continued presence of IPKF in Sri Lanka. To justify the Indian action he said Sri Lanka would have disintegrated if Delhi had not acted to stabilize the situation.<sup>35</sup> He further claimed that smooth handling of recent local, parliamentary and presidential elections in Sri Lanka were possible only because Indian troops had been there. In his opening speech to the last session of the Parliament before the Lok Sabha polls he sounded keen to defend his actions in the crisis when he said, "it was India which persuaded Tamils to give up their demand for an independent state and lay down their weapons."<sup>36</sup> Rajiv must be knowing well the substance of his boastful success as far as laying down of arms is concerned. It has also been amply demonstrated how fragile is the Tamil commitment to give up the demand for separate state, as even the moderate EPRLF-led combine has indicated that their ultimate objective was independence.<sup>27</sup> In any case, what appears evident is that the Prime Minister's claims are directed in a great measure towards Indian public opinion on the eve of the forthcoming elections.

The problem on the whole is too complex to permit any prediction of resolution in the immediate future. Premadasa for his part appears in all fairness to have been over-stressing on his cards, and his actions including the boycott of SAARC seem to have imperiled

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35. *Bangladesh Observer*, 18 July 1989.

36. *Ibid*, 19 July 1989.

37. *Ibid*, 26 July 1989.

for a time the prospect of an accommodative time-table for withdrawal. The fact remains that the ethnic problem is essentially the creation of Colombo's political mismanagement over the years which is also to be partly responsible for creating opportunity for India to intervene. And in the end it is also Sri Lanka which stands to lose more in the event of a continued deadlock between the two countries. It was also clear from the very beginning of the present crisis that in all likelihood the first concession towards a breakthrough had to come from Colombo. The issue has to be eventually resolved; but the point is that it is leaving bad taste in everyone's mouth. Even worse, mutual trust between South Asian nations, so important for the peoples of the region—cooperation under SAARC makes progress or not—has suffered yet nother damage, once again mainly because India keeps on throwing its weights around.

The theme of SAARC diplomacy could possibly be to persuade the two sides to agree on the potential of the association to contribute—imperceptibly though—to regional harmony and accommodation. The need for mutual give and take in critical moments like this should be firmly stressed. The priority should now be on saving the forthcoming summit. Sri Lankan acceptance of a *firm* Indian commitment to withdraw with a *jointly worked out specific time-table* may help ease the situation. But, the settlement of the crisis between India and Sri Lanka, and more importantly, resolution of the Sri Lankan ethnic problem itself would remain a concern for not only India and Sri Lanka but also for the rest of the region. Meanwhile, violences in Sri Lanka continued with the prospect of peace caught up in a quagmire of Sinhala-Tamil, Tamil-Tamil, IPKF-LTTE, JVP-IPKF hostilities and mistrusts. To add to further complications the Sri Lankan and Indian armies traded shots killing some soldiers at both the ends.<sup>38</sup> This latter event was significant particularly as it came in the wake of strong Indian objection to a Sri Lankan Minister's statement that in the event of Indian refusal

38. *Ibid*, 17 July 1989.

to withdraw the possibility of a conflict between the two armies could not be ruled out. The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister even said that his army would soon begin operations in areas controlled by Indian troops. India asked Sri Lanka to withdraw the statement, but Rajiv added to the speculations when he carefully avoided rejecting such a possibility by saying that he hoped better sense will prevail.<sup>39</sup> A direct conflict between the two armies, needless to mention, would be the worst possible nightmare for Indo-Sri Lankan relations and for that matter for the future of South Asia. One possible way to prevent such eventualities might be a series of quadrangular dialogues between New Delhi, Colombo, LTTE and the moderate Tamil groups aiming at long-term resolution of the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka.

On a broader focus, it is essential also to appreciate at this stage the limits of Sri Lankan maneuverability in the context of a changing international climate as manifested particularly by the way the major powers responded to the recent developments in South Asia. The fact that India would obtain immediate support of the Soviets was nothing new. But the way the West, particularly the US rushed to endorse recent Indian coercive actions in the region is significant.<sup>40</sup> What appears critical is not merely a bipartisan East-West consensus over Indian pre-eminence in South Asia, but also the implication of the same for the smaller states of the region, namely an imperative to learn to live without antagonizing India too much. One further conclusion that emerges is that to the extent India's policy is to make use of the vulnerabilities of these small neighbours to expand its political and strategic influence, the obvious option for them is to minimize such vulnerabilities, before it is too late, by way of deftly and politically handling such issues as have cross-border ramifications involving India.

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39. *Ibid*, 18 July 1989.

40. For a detailed discussion on the subject see, Iftekharuzzaman, "Changing Global Scenario . . .", *op. cit.*

### Implications for SAARC

Despite fullest commitment and obligations to regional cooperation, member-countries tend to behave as independent sovereign entities. Individual states have their own political, economic, moral, psychological and other compulsions in behaving in their own way. Whatever may be the degree of cooperation and level of expectation from regionalism, respective national interests and motivations define the way a particular member state would behave in a multilateral or regional forum. To that extent a regional organization turns out to be a meeting ground of a complex set of divergent national interests and ego-centric policies. The basic rules of the game for a regional organization, therefore, include some sacrifice and mutual give-and-take in favour of common goals.

Viewed in such perspective, the fact that SAARC has not achieved any spectacular success in cooperation does not seem to be too surprising. It needs to be stressed that the problems that the states of the region face in their inter-state relations are too deep-rooted and complex to be totally resolved by any SAARC magic. The association was born in multiplicity of problems among its member states and it was only obvious that it will have to function within the limitations defined by its intra-mural problems. The fact that the seven have committed to cooperate within a mutually acceptable framework has, however, raised the expectation that there will be a process of mutual complementarity between progress in cooperation in so-called non-controversial areas on the one hand, and creation of conditions congenial to resolution of some of the complex inter-state problems on the other. It also increased the likelihood that conflicts and issues of relatively lesser intensity would not turn into serious confrontations, while those of more serious nature would not tear the association apart. And indeed, as indicated in some of the earlier pages of this paper, the experience of past few years indicated a positive move towards that direction.

The Indo-Sri Lanka crisis has certainly caused a serious setback to that process. The problem itself is so complex and involves so

high stakes of both the parties that the two allowed their relation to reach an all-time nadir. The timing of the crisis, from the point of view of respective domestic political scenario also to an extent defined the level of intransigence at both ends. Sri Lanka was clearly compelled to overstretch its SAARC card because of a desperate need of diverting the attention of its people from pressing domestic problems and more importantly, to strike a deal with the powerful LTTE and to neutralize JVP.

Indian intransigence, for its part was dictated as much by its long-term politico-strategic goals and concerns for the security of Tamils as by the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Evidences in this paper are ample to suggest that much of Rajiv Gandhi's actions were aimed at taking the electorate along. It is not unrealistic to argue that a lesser degree of intransigence, if not a conciliatory and low-profile approach on the part of New Delhi, would have helped ease the situation. India could, for example, win the confidence of fellow SAARC members by attempting in the heat of the crisis to directly persuade Sri Lanka to come to Islamabad for the SAARC meeting. That would have—even in case of being rejected—raised New Delhi's image as a member committed to SAARC. Its insistence, instead, on the need to keep bilateral issues out-side SAARC spoke of its cold shoulder not merely to the concerns of Sri Lanka but also to the cause of the association.

It is for Sri Lanka, on the other hand to realize that SAARC or no SAARC, its ethnic problem is likely to complicate as farther as its actions would antagonize New Delhi. The way New Delhi cannot resolve the problem by by-passing Colombo and LTTE, Sri Lanka also can hardly expect to make much progress by leaving apart the moderate Tamils and more importantly India itself. Its boycott diplomacy in the context of SAARC may have served a moral purpose of drawing sympathy of other fellow-members, but to the extent it would damage a common cause, such a policy may also soon lead to an erosion of the same.



Once SAARC is part of reality in South Asia, it is in all likelihood going to perpetuate. Its activities at certain level of intra-mural crisis like the one under consideration may in worst case get frozen. It needs to be appreciated that such eventuality does not serve the common interests of the member countries, not to speak of helping resolve the issues themselves as experience has shown. After all, if SAARC is intended to be an instrument for pressurizing a fellow member in discord to come forward in resolving bilateral problems, it has to be all the more kept alive and active. Any damage to the association—whatever un-spectacular its accomplishments may be—is likely to be self-defeating for the region. What is needed, therefore, is to attempt getting the best out of this forum and its cooperative programmes to contribute of gradual building of confidence rather than opting for confrontation.