

PLAYING CHINESE CHECKERS – II

Contd. from Saturday

On the face of it, India should have no problem acknowledging the Sri Lankan position on the strategic front involving China. Along the north-western border, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, India has strong US military presence. Pakistan also enjoys a continuing clout with China, as if Islamabad too were riding two horses at a time.

Whatever the logic, the arrival of the US across the north-western borders – and the circumstances in which it landed in Afghanistan has silenced Indian critics of China-Pakistan relations. Terrorism-related developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan have taken care of that – at least for now. In the past, Islamabad had also mastered the art of mixing American weapons supplies with Chinese diplomatic support to fight India, militarily.

For the host nation, the US involvement in Afghanistan since the late Seventies has ultimately proved to be a disaster of unprecedented proportions – worse than Vietnam. Iraq is a separate case. China is as much an extra-territorial power in the Sri Lankan context as the US is to Afghanistan or Iraq. It flows from their understanding, or lack of understanding of the host nation in its entity. Their concern for the interests of the host nation could at best be surrealistic and superfluous. The less said about the reverse process, the better.

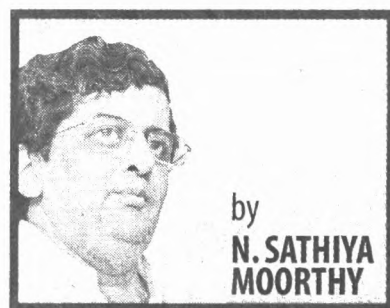
Proximity alone is no guarantor for a better understanding of men and their methods in the evolution of bilateral relations. Moscow learnt it the hard way in Afghanistan. So did India, in the case of Sri Lanka. Both are wiser by their experiences. If anything, it is this experience that seems to be moulding the 'New Millennium' Indian approach to Sri Lanka – and possibly the rest of South Asia. Sri Lanka has benefited.

It is not the content that makes 'China card' relevant in the post-war Sri Lanka. It is the accompanying political theory, often parroted in private that may have caused eyebrows to rise. There is nothing to suggest that this theory is also the emerging official position – and is thus applicable.

According to the proponents of this theory, if Colombo has to choose between China and India for a long-term ally, it should pick up the former. The theory is based on the archaic, 'Cold War' perceptions of 'exclusivity'. Flowing from such a construct is also the position, "If you are not my friend, you are my enemy."



Norochcholai Coal Power Plant Project



The argument has its origins in the 'Tamil issue' and the 'Tamil Nadu factor'. In the case of China, goes the logic, Sri Lanka does not have to worry about anything like the influence of Tamil Nadu society and polity on the bilateral decisions of New Delhi. That is to say, there are no strings attached to Chinese aid and assistance, including political support!

China has tons of money at the moment – and also a veto vote in the UN Security Council. New Delhi cannot match Beijing on both scores for at least some more time to come. Yet, ways have been found for India providing market for Sri Lankan products and services – and also for mutual investments. The FTA has proved more than a point. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which continues to be under active consideration, can take it forward. Unlike aid and assistance that come with an unmentioned political price-tag, CEPA

In the perception of some Sri Lankan economists and veteran economic administrators, the country could

become the "Hong Kong of India". The latter, in their reckoning, has the need for one. This need will only increase in the coming years and decades. In turn, this would put the Sri Lankan economy first back on the rails and later on the top of the list of South Asian economic performers as fast as the country achieved the honour in the Seventies.

At the height of the 'Eelam War IV', India showed that it did not need veto power to bring around – or, check – emerging and more powerful adversaries of Sri Lanka on the global scene. Nor did China stop the West from a reference being made to the Sri Lankan situation in the UN Security Council, after a point. If China has the veto vote, so has Russia. In trade-offs of the kind as was witnessed in the Security Council during the closing weeks of the ethnic war, nations like Sri Lanka would continue to be treated as pawns by the 'Big Five' – and nothing more.

India and Sri Lanka cannot shed the geographical and geological realities governing their two nations and their peoples. Nor can they wish away the geo-strategic realities on which neither has any great control after a point. Given the attendant realities, it is truer of Sri Lanka than of India – and would remain so for all times to come.

By the same token, neither can Sri Lanka – nor India, for that matter – wish away the realities of Tamil Nadu politics and society in matters pertaining to the 'ethnic issue' in the island-nation. Electoral politics is a game which President Rajapaksa is as well-versed in as anyone else – and understands the compulsions of the same, as any other.

The 'Tamil Nadu factor' will remain relevant to bilateral relations only until Sri Lanka finds a peaceful solution to the 'ethnic issue'. That can happen tomorrow, that can take weeks and months, if not years and decades. The other issue pertains to fishing in the Palk Bay. No Chinese presence can wish away the issue, for which peaceful solutions are already on the anvil. Negative impulses on these counts can only upset the bilateral apple-cart, where is no need or reason.

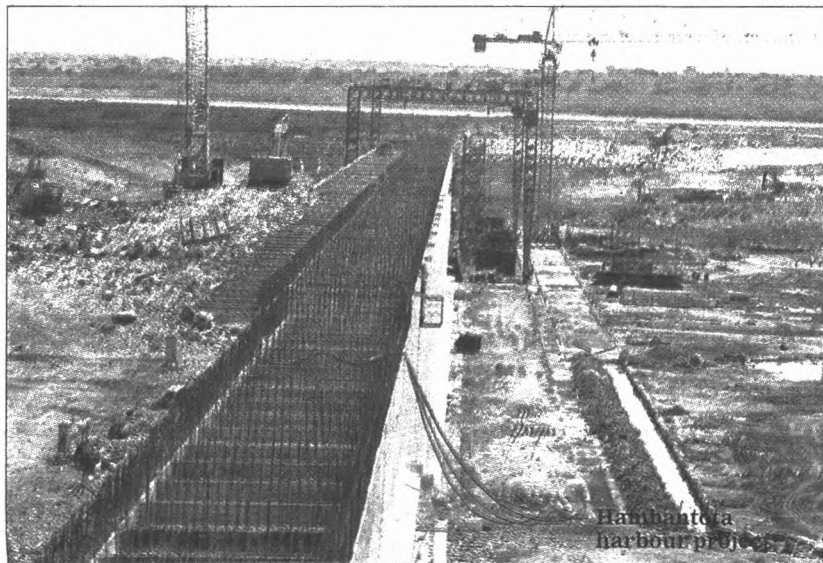
Introducing external elements or alternative sources/resources into bilateral discourses cannot alter the situation. It can complicate the rela-

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tions, if at all. Given his vast political experience and the exposure that the conduct of the 'Eelam War IV' entailed, President Rajapaksa would understand this as well – than those who are not as much privy to the pressures of public office as he is.

Throughout 'Eelam War IV' and also post-LTTE, Tamil elements in Sri Lanka are known to refer to the 'China angle' in bilateral relations with India. New Delhi has not bought their argument that the Tamil community and polity have been bulwarks of 'Indian interests' in Sri Lanka, against the 'expansionist tendencies' of China. It did not do so in the past, and there is no reason to believe that it would have cause to do so in the future.

(To be continued tomorrow)



Hambantota harbour project