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The Indo-Lanka Land bridge: Reviving the Proposal

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A newspaper reported recently that the Chairman of the National Transport Commission had informed that the proposal to construct a Land Bridge connecting India and Sri Lanka would feature at the second meeting of the SAARC Ministers of Transport. This was subsequently affirmed in a newsline which reported on the items discussed at the said meeting held in Colombo from 25-27 July 2009. Its inclusion in the SAARC domain suggests its relevance in the context of connectivity in the wider region. The latter's strategic transport blueprint has already been conceived in the UN-ESCAP initiative of the Asian Highway and the Trans – Asian Railway. Previously, the link for the transport of goods and passengers between the two countries across the Palk Strait had been limited to a ferry service, which, too, was abandoned due to the internal conflict in the north of Sri Lanka . The subsequent efforts made for its revival had failed. On the other hand, the end of the warring between the parties, now offers a beacon of hope. The link could however be a more appropriate form to include road and rail transport. The latter will then facilitate a quantum leap in trade, tourism and other services. Its longer term benefit will specifically be the integration of the economic sub-region comprising Sri Lanka and the four Southern States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Its short –term impact will be the potential outcomes of Sri Lanka's connectivity to India's world class Golden Quadrilateral Highway Network, and thereby to the previously mentioned UN-ESCAP road and rail initiative. This will complement the "bridge" already in place to close the digital divide, and the power divide by the supply of electricity along a route between Madurai and Anuradhapura with a submarine cable across the Palk Strait.

The revival of the proposal by Sri Lanka for building the Indo-Lanka Bridge to close the physical divide between the two massively contrasting land masses, may find it useful to look back on the continuum on same. Its origins date back to British colonial times. An Internet search indicates that the imperative for linking the two countries at that time had been for the transport of workers hired from Tamil Nadu to tea plantations here. Consequently, steps had been taken by the colonial administrators not only to propose the 'Indo-Ceylon Bridge' but also to also link the mainlands of the two countries that were separated from its contiguous territories by the islets fronting the Palk Strait, which could serve as its two ends. Available records show that the "Indo-Ceylon Bridge" had been proposed as far back as 1894 by the Consultant Engineer for railways in Madras. Its object had been to create a land route connecting Madras with Colombo, via Erode, Trichinopoly, Madurai and Rameshwaran (in India) and Mannar (in Ceylon). Around this same time, the Chief Resident Engineer (Railway Extensions) in Ceylon was instructed by the Government "to inspect and report on the proposed route of the Indo-Ceylon Railway from Pamban to Talladi near Mannar." The serious consideration at the time of the proposed Bridge is reflected in its advance from a technical blueprint to actual costing. The 22-mile rail bridge over the Palk Strait had been estimated to cost one-fifths that of the entire project.

Pamban Bridge

Thus, by 1913/14, the southern tip of the Indian mainland at Mandapam was connected with Pamban Island by constructing a pre-dominantly rail bridge with a road segment. The town of Dhanushkodi in this island comprised the designated terminal for travel to and from India across the Palk Strait. The narrow gauge Pamban Bridge of 2.06 km length had a portion which could be lifted to permit boats to pass underneath. At this same time (in 1913), the mainland of Ceylon at its north- western town of Mannar was connected to its Mannar Island (or Talaimannar) by a broad gauge rail bridge across the sea separating them. Accordingly, the pier at Talaimannar became the landing jetty for travel to Ceylon across the Palk Strait. It is noteworthy that the first train from within Ceylon crossed over from Mannar to Talaimannar in 1914. Thus, although the rail tracks at the two ends of the envisaged Indo-Ceylon Railway were constructed, the Bridge linking them across the Palk Strait had not materialised. The likely reason for the latter was attributed by a Lankan Railway Engineer to the rail track in the entirety of the route being of different gauges and not of a uniform broad gauge. Meanwhile, it is notworthy that two years ago the track on the Pamban Bridge was converted to the broad gauge.

The commencement of train operations on the Talaimannar line enabled the carriage of the Indo-Ceylon traffic for several decades via a daily ferry service across the Palk Strait between Dhanushkodi (in India), and the Talaimannar pier (in Ceylon). This was considered the cheapest mode of transport of passengers and goods between the two neighbouring countries. The latter continued until 1967, when a cyclone destroyed the port of Dhanushkodi, and also damaged the Talaimannar pier. Boats, too, were damaged beyond repair. Nonetheless, in the early 1970s the travel between the two countries by train and ferry was revived from a landing jetty at Rameshwaran in Pamban Island and the repaired pier at Talaimannar with the operation of a single boat. Its popularity was reflected in the carrying of 900 passengers per trip plying thrice in each week, under normal weather conditions. Reportedly, it could not cope with the growing demand, resulting in the shutting out of thousands of passengers. However, as previously mentioned, the internal conflict in north Sri Lanka which began in 1983 with limited violence, became a widespread raging battle in the subsequent years. The efforts to bring about a settlement between the warring parties failed in spite of periodic calm during the times of peace negotiations.

It had a spillover influence over the border in Tamil Nadu. Hence, its outcome was an end to the revived ferry service across the Palk Strait. Several efforts were made by the Sri Lankan Government to discuss with India for re-starting the ferry service during the period 2002 to 2004 when a "Ceasefire Agreement " was brokered by the Norwegian Government serving as a Facilitator acceptable to both parties in the conflict. Nevertheless, India's response was lukewarm with no result to show on ground. Its principal objector was the Tamil Nadu State Government.

On the other hand, the imperative to broaden links between Sri Lanka and India continued unabated. The Lankan Prime Minister at that time perceived the spillover effect of the conflict "as loud and emotional disputes which erupt from time to time in any vibrant democracy". Thus, in December 2001 during a visit to India he proposed to his counterpart the building of the Land Bridge across the Palk Strait linking Talaimannar in Sri Lanka and Rameshwaran in South India. He pushed for the Bridge stating that, "it would offer both sides huge economic benefits, with industry springing up on both ends of the project". He considered the prospects arising from the Bridge as a continuum of the process which began with the Indo-Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA) that was entered into in 1998 and operationalized in 2000. Further, he explained that the objective of the Bridge was to promote higher growth through the economic integration of Sri Lanka with the southern part of the Indian Subcontinent by creating a "Pearl River Delta" type compact linking Hong Kong and the province of Guangdong in China. He deduced that achieving the latter necessarily required," the linking of India and Sri Lanka with a Land Bridge, a railway and highway system, which would connect the ports of Colombo, Trincomalee and Chennai, with Madurai becoming a major manufacturing centre." In this context, the Bridge was to create an Indo-Lanka Development Corridor. This was observed by an eminent economist of global repute, Prof. Jeffery Sachs, who submitted that, 'the Land Bridge should be the cornerstone for the economic integration between the two countries, and should be a contributory factor for creating a hub'.

Connecting growth nodal points

The enthusiastic support for the Land Bridge proposal widened laterally among the engineering and academic community on both sides of the Palk Strait. Thus, a joint Seminar hosted by the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka, and the Institution of Engineers, India (Tamil Nadu State Centre) was held in Colombo in August 2002. Its presentations were of high value to the proposal, inclusive of a profile of the engineering design and of its preliminary economic and financial evaluations. The latter stressed the importance of linking the Land Bridge with the highway network connecting the growth nodal points. This was consistent with the research work being done at the University of Moratuwa (UOM) on the Indo-Lanka Development Corridor based on the Bridge connectivity. Meanwhile, the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka (BOI), too, had prepared a preliminary report for the Government to be utilised in discussions with India as per the latter's agreement to undertake a feasibility study on the Land Bridge proposal. It envisaged the design of the Bridge as 'a four-lane highway with a parallel single rail track'. It was explicit that 'for the most effective movement of passengers and goods and to obtain the maximum benefit the proposed Land Bridge should have both highway and railway facilities'.

The BOI Report had estimated the cost of construction of the Bridge at Sri Lankan Rupees 88 Billion to be financed under the following options:

i) BOT—Private sector financing for the project on "Build, Operate and Transfer" basis ;

ii) Co-financing between the Indian and Sri Lankan Governments;

iii) bi-lateral and multi-lateral financing.

The aforesaid prompted the work being done at the UOM to enquire from the then Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka on the feasibility of using the Sovereign Rating that was being contemplated by it at the time for raising funds in the global capital market, as was done to mobilise capital to finance the Oresund Fixed Link Bridge between Denmark and Sweden.

Jayelalitha's fears

In spite of the surge in the interest on the proposed Land Bridge, the continuing instability caused by the internal conflict in Sri Lanka's north became a political roadblock. The mindset of a share of the Lankan public was also negatively expressed in the local media. Above all, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu State, Ms. Jeyaram Jayalalitha, conveyed her concerns in two letters to the Union Prime Minister. She stated in one letter that she was totally against the Land Bridge project and insisted that the matter be viewed 'not as one of economic co-operation between the two countries, but as a vital issue concerning the security of Tamil Nadu and India'. Giving reasons for her objection, she further stated that 'the LTTE brought the gun culture and worse still the horror of suicide bombing. They had also found some pretext to circumnavigate peace talks and to revert to its patented brand of ugly terrorism. When this was its track record, it would be premature and unwise to contemplate any Land Bridge between the two countries". In her second letter, she had asked the Indian Prime Minister 'to put off the request for reviving the ferry service between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, as it was not an opportune time".

Nonetheless, the bilateral interest to foster economic co-operation continued. Thus, in September 2004 the late Mr. Lakshman Kadirgamar, Sri Lanka's then Foreign Minister, addressing a meeting of the Japan-Sri Lanka Business Co-operation Committee, invited Japanese investors "to make use of the door opened to India through the ISLFTA". He also announced that "Sri Lanka will particularly aim to develop ties with the Southern Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh". In addition, the then Lankan Prime Minister who is currently the President addressing the Confederation of Indian Industry in September 2005,stated that "I am totally committed to the greater economic integration of South Asia".

In the above context, it also becomes noteworthy that in February 2005, India's then Foreign Secretary, Mr. Shyam Saran stated :

"The challenge for our diplomacy lies in convincing our neighbours that India is an opportunity, not a threat, that far from being besieged by India, they have a vast productive hinterland that would give their economies far greater opportunities for growth, than if they were to rely on their domestic markets alone."

In these circumstances, it can be seen as a natural gravitation for Sri Lanka's current Transport Minister who when he participated at the First Meeting of the SAARC Transport Ministers held in New Delhi in September 2007, 'to moot a rail corridor between Chennai and Colombo as part of a SAARC initiative to increase connectivity between the member countries". It was further significant that he took the opportunity while in Delhi to meet separately with his Indian counterpart to point out that, 'constructing a bridge on the Palk Strait to link both countries with a railway line would benefit both countries'.

Military Victory

The interest of the Lankan Transport Minister to revive the proposal on the Land Bridge at the Second Meeting of the SAARC Transport Ministers that was held from 25 to 27 July 2009 in Colombo, may have given it an added impetus. Its status may have been far more relevant due to the military victory over the LTTE three months before. Yet, the mindset of the two countries were pre-occupied with the issues related to the fallout from the end of the conflict, such as the resettlement, rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war ravaged areas. Further, the overall concern of the SAARC Meeting was to establish "a clear realisation at the political level regarding the necessity to strengthen people-to-people connectivity in South Asia through infrastructure development and enhanced transport linkages". Consequently, the Land Bridge may have had to be viewed against that backdrop. The latter may have been the reason for the NTC Chairman to have indicated prior to the SAARC Meeting that, 'it is still at least ten years away and should be seen as a long term project'.The Lankan Transport Minister himself stated that, 'the railway link between Talaimannar and Chennai and a land bridge would be considered as the projects of the centur'. Hence, his immediate focus shifted to the revival of the ferry service between Colombo and Cochin, for which he stated that Sri Lanka had already constructed the local infrastructure to commence the project. His Indian counterpart reportedly expressed his readiness for same. Its realisation will then be the first step towards firming the protocols to bridge the physical divide across the Palk Strait.

The roadmap for reviving the Land Bridge proposal may, therefore, necessitate continued focus by expert groups of both countries. In the latter connection, it will be appropriate that the "transport-centric" approach be reviewed to formulate a "development-centric" approach. This will give credence for incorporating the rail and highway construction as the means to the end. Undoubtedly, the harmonisation of norms and regulations for the transport sector to function across the Palk Strait will be inevitable. On the other hand, it will also be necessary for labour regulations, taxation, visas, etc. The experience elsewhere, such as the Oresund Fixed Link Bridge indicated same. Research on the latter prompted the UOM to hold consultations with the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce to sensitise the Trade sector on the matter. It was extended to even the ADB to sensitise its Country Representative in Colombo. The underlying process for facilitating these consultations was the Transnational Spatial Strategy formulated for the Sr Lankan side of the Indo-Lanka Development Corridor. Its domain in the science of Physical Planning validated the networking of the potential nodal growth points. Accordingly, it may be opportune to review the work in the continuum of activity on the Land Bridge proposal. The analysis of the issues involved will clearly ratify a multi-disciplinary approach in same. The latter was a classic omission in the massive Mahaweli Development Project which focused itself on dams, reservoirs, and power stations. Consequently, the source of development was marginalised i. e. the human settlements and its spatial networks. The nation thereby missed vast opportunities that could have otherwise accrued from incorporating the Colombo-Trincomalee Development Corridor as an integral part of the Mahaweli Project. The repetition of similar omission by focussing dominantly on the Land Bridge and its multi-modal transport system may become a mistake of catastrophic proportion which will be best to avoid.