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India-Sri Lanka: Security and Geopolitics

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(This editorial is based on the article 'The Easter bombings in Sri Lanka foreshadow a regional challenge' which was published in 'ORF' on 24th March, 2019. The article talks about the recent bombings that shook Sri Lanka and its potential repercussion for India.)

Recently a series of bomb blasts shook Sri Lanka, shattering a decade-long peace on the island nation. The blasts brought to fore the underlying tensions in the nation's society and polity. The gruesome bombings are a stark reminder of the nation's violent past, where a 25-year civil war took more than 70,000 lives and ended only when Sri Lankan forces finally defeated the Tamil Tigers in 2009.

After a decade long silence the island nation seems to be heading towards a tumultuous phase, which recently has witnessed spike in the form of communal tension, breakdown of constitutional machinery and now a series of blasts.

Background for the Recent Attacks

The carefully coordinated and meticulously planned attacks targeted busy Easter services and three luxury hotels in the capital city of Colombo. As many as 300 plus people died in the attacks.

Sri Lanka's minority Christian community which accounts for less than 10% of the total population of 21.4 million, was the main target of the attack. Religious tensions have grown in recent years, with the emergence of radical Islamist groups on the one hand and a surge in ultra-nationalist Buddhism led by the Bodu Bala Sena on the other.

Christians had so far not been the targets of violence in Sri Lanka. But now global narratives are seemingly influencing Sri Lanka's local conflict.

Significance of the Attack

The failure on the part of intelligence agencies to act on a sound Intel underlines the gross lack of accountability and responsibility in the country's security apparatus which had "prior information" on the attacks.

There has also been a tactical failure insofar as Sri Lanka's institutional framework has been found to be wanting at a time of such a grave crisis and clearly was clueless in how to respond to the impending attack.

There has also been a larger strategic failure in keeping track of the evolution of **National Thowheeth Jama'at** (NJT - group that has been blamed for carrying out the attacks) from a fringe group into a larger threat, if reports of its involvement are indeed correct.

Tensions between Sri Lankan PM and President will now be further aggravated as the country moves closer to elections. [[Check Read More](#)]

Sri Lanka's Unstable Past

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is rooted in the discrimination against the Tamil minority by the Sinhalese majority after the end of British colonial domination in 1948.

In the years following independence, the Sinhalese, who resented British favouritism toward Tamils during the colonial period, disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers from India and made Sinhala the official language.

In 1972, the Sinhalese changed the country's name from Ceylon and made Buddhism the nation's primary religion. As ethnic tension grew, in 1976, the LTTE (Liberation for Tamil Tiger Eelam) was formed under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, and it began to campaign for a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the island's Tamils reside eventually turning into a full-fledged civil war in 1983.

The LTTE emerged as the main rebel organization fighting for the establishment of an independent state for Sri Lanka's Tamils in the island's northeast. Their fight against the Sri Lankan state led to an armed conflict that lasted for 26 years.

The war was marked by phases of high intensity (Eelam War I: June 1983-July 1987; Eelam War II: June 1990-January 1995; Eelam War III: April 1995-February 2002; Eelam War IV: July 2006-May 2009) interrupted by different efforts to find a negotiated solution, which failed altogether.

India's Engagement During the Civil War

Despite India and Sri Lanka sharing a relationship with each other for more than 2,500 years, during the civil war the relations between the two nations deteriorated significantly.

Sri Lanka blamed India for playing a crucial role in this conflict and accused the central government under Indira Gandhi of supporting Tamil rebel groups by providing them with military assistance and training, and doing this all from Indian Territory.

However, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, relations under Rajiv Gandhi started to improve who took a more neutral stance on the issue. India assumed a conflict-management role and attempted to mediate between the conflict parties in the 1980s.

On July 29, 1987, secret negotiations between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments led to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA) and, shortly thereafter, India deployed its Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the North and the East of the island with the task of supervising the ceasefire and disarming the LTTE.

The IPKF mission soon turned out to be the darkest episode in India's regional policy: The LTTE, which had not been invited to the ISLA negotiations, resisted being disarmed and started fighting the IPKF. After three years, given the increasingly evident failure of the IPKF, which was not adequately trained for a guerrilla war, India withdrew its troops. The IPKF debacle deeply influenced India's approach to conflict management in the region by highlighting the limits of India's military power and the risks of interventionist policies.

Ever since India has resorted to least intervention in the island nation and after the end of civil war the relations have significantly improved between two.

Improving Ties Between India and Sri Lanka

Commercial relationship

Sri Lanka is one of India's largest trading partners in SAARC. India in turn is amongst the Sri Lanka's largest trade partners globally. Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the entry into force of the **India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement** in March 2000.

Sri Lanka has long been a priority destination for direct investment from India. Investments are in diverse areas including petroleum, retail, IT, financial services, real estate, telecommunication, hospitality & tourism, banking and food processing (tea & fruit juices) etc.

Defence cooperation

India and Sri Lanka conducts one of the largest joint Military exercises called 'Mitra Shakthi' and a Naval exercise called 'SLINEX'.

India is also the largest provider of defence training program to Sri Lankan soldiers and Defence officials.

India, Sri Lanka and Maldives also have trilateral maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. The cooperation aims at improving surveillance, anti-piracy operations and reducing maritime pollution.

Developmental Assistance

The conclusion of the civil war saw the emergence of a major humanitarian challenge, with nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians housed in camps for **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**. The Government of India put in place a robust programme of assistance to help IDPs return to normal life as quickly as possible.

Significance of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, sits at the epicentre of the arc connecting the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca. An island nation with an economy that's mainly reliant on tourism and tea exports, Sri Lanka's blessed geography puts it at a crucial juncture of the busy shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean.

While India has enjoyed the status of being Sri Lanka's main economic partner for most part of its independent history and shares strong cultural and historical bonds, China is fast catching up and even overtook New Delhi as Colombo's largest trading partner in 2017.

The most famous symbol of the burgeoning Sri Lanka-China cooperation is the port of Hambantota at the island's south, viewed as an important cog in the wheel of Beijing's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, or a part of "String of Pearls" that Beijing seeks to create around its neighbour India in fight for regional, and ultimately, global dominance.

India also has a vital strategic stake in Sri Lanka for its own security interests. An unfriendly Sri Lanka or a Sri Lanka under influence of a power unfriendly to India would strategically discomfit India.

For the Indian Navy, Sri Lanka is important as the switching of naval fleets from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea and vice versa requires the fleets to go around the island nation..

Way Forward

The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is more than 2,500 years old. Both countries have a legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction however the nations have had their issues.

In recent times the relations between the two have improved and any disturbing developments in Sri Lanka might pose challenge security challenge to India. Given the volatility that affects the Indian Ocean, an unstable nation will drastically increase the Indian geostrategic problem. Hence, internal stability in Sri Lanka is very desirable for India.