

VIMARSH : CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA, ITS IMPACT ON INDIA AND POLICY OPTIONS

Vimarsh, the monthly discussion session of VKI was held at 6.30 pm on 23rd May 09 in the premises of [VIVEKANANDA KENDRA INTERNATIONAL](#) [1], CHANKYAPURI. Sri Ajit Doval, the honorary director of VKI, introduced the topic and the speaker, Dr Chandrasekharan. He mentioned about the annihilation of LTTE in Sri Lanka which is culturally and historically very close to India. It was a significant development which would leave repercussions in the entire south Asian region for a long time. He added that LTTE which was one of the finest guerilla forces in the world had displayed ferocious fighting tactics in the past. It lost the battle miserably due to various reasons like lack of proper strategy, over confidence etc. Unlike the Maoists in Nepal and the insurgent groups in east Timor, they did not make use of judicious political and strategic manoeuvring and took on the Sri Lankan army which surpassed it in the quality of weapons, training etc, due to which they got eliminated.

The speech of Dr Chandrasekhar, who is the director of South Asia analysis group, covered following three aspects

- (1) Current position of Tamils and the Sri Lankan as well as the Tamil leaders
- (2) Indian involvement and Indian interest
- (3) The options available now.

These aspects elaborated were as follows :

After the destruction of LTTE and their top leaders, the leadership of the Tamil community has become weak. He added that when the Sri Lankan government launched an offensive to wipe out the LTTE, they did not want the Indian government to get involved in it. As a result of the battle between Sri Lankan army and LTTE, thousands of Tamil civilians were killed and wounded. Thousands were rendered homeless and the condition of the refugees in the relief camps was pathetic. He mentioned that the Tamil community once proud of their culture and heritage were now in a precarious condition living in a constant fear of persecution by the Sri Lankan Sinhalese. The task of nation building in Sri Lanka is far from complete and nationalism there has got confused with the sense of paranoia towards India which the Sinhalese community are afflicted with. Due to terrorist activities of the LTTE, thousands of innocent Tamil youth have been arrested and tortured in the interrogation centers by the Sri Lankan authorities.

In 1987, India intervened in the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government as it was concerned about the well being of the Tamil community there. However it could not resolve the conflict and after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, India turned hostile towards LTTE. Moreover after the 9/11 episode, USA declared LTTE as a terrorist organization and various countries in the world like Britain, Israel started providing military and technological help to the Sri Lankan army to vanquish the LTTE. India remained a mute spectator, as it decided not to intervene when President Rajapakse proclaimed his intention of crushing the LTTE. India has always been committed towards seeing Sri Lanka as a united country, but it should ensure that no injustice is done to any of the ethnic groups there. Right from the time when Sri Lanka became independent, it could not bring about a reconciliation and harmony between the

Sinhalese and the Tamil communities and no efforts were made by the government to promote the language and the culture of the Tamil community. LTTE came into existence as a result of the injustice and indifference shown towards the Tamil community by the Sri Lankan government. During the battles between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE, even the civilian areas of the Tamils were bombed by the Sri Lankan air force planes flown by British and South African pilots. All the efforts which had been made by India by sending IPKF to effect a sufficient autonomy for the Tamil community and to make the LTTE militants lay down their weapons, had failed. India therefore has become totally apathetic towards the scenario there. Thousands of Tamils from Sri Lanka came as refugees to India.

Now after one of the most lethal terrorist groups has been eliminated, the immediate concern should be to provide relief in the form of food, medicines, housing to the multitude of civilians who were caught in the war zone. Moreover for bringing about peace and harmony between the various ethnic groups, demilitarization is imperative. It is very important for India to exercise her influence for protecting her interests. It can be done by a number of techniques such as diplomatic, economic etc. We should ensure that Sri Lanka should not become very friendly with nations like China, Pakistan etc which have an anti-Indian attitude, as that will be detrimental to the interests of India.

The speech of Dr Chandrasekharan was followed by the interaction session in which the distinguished audience comprising of eminent personalities like Admiral Raman Puri, Ambassador N.N Jha, and Ambassador Rajiv Sikri asked questions and expressed their reflections about the emerging scenario in Sri Lanka.

Ambassador N.N Jha reflected on the indirect role played by the USA in helping the Sri Lankan army. Japan acted on the behest of USA and provided vital technological support to Sri Lanka for destroying LTTE which acquired the notoriety of a terrorist organization after the 9/11 terrorist attack on America. He asserted that we should follow a policy of intercession if not intervention to ensure that Sri Lanka does not succumb to the pressure from countries like Pakistan and China which have hostile intentions towards India. We should also see that the interests of the Tamil community are protected in Sri Lanka, otherwise it will lead to unrest and unfavorable reactions in Tamil Nadu, creating an animosity there against Sri Lanka.

Ambassador Rajiv Sikri expounded that instead of constructing the Setu Samudram project, we should build a bridge up to Sri Lanka. We should invest more money in the industries in Sri Lanka rather than providing aid to countries like Afghanistan. That will enable us to exercise a greater influence over the policies followed by the Sri Lankan government and promote our interests. He added that India should not merely confine itself to passive activities like reconstruction or providing relief but should play a strong and active role there for enhancing our interests.

Admiral Raman Puri elaborated on the leverage that can be used by India in Sri Lanka for promoting our interests. He cited the analogy mentioned by President Obama "Sri Lanka is to India, what Cuba is to USA? Just as USA can not tolerate any government in Cuba, inimical to it, we should also have the same attitude towards Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans are apprehensive that becoming very friendly with India will be detrimental to their native industries as Indian industries will completely engulf them. He also mentioned that having a proper cohesion between foreign policy and strategic positions of our armed forces in foreign territories is very essential for gaining a proper leverage there.

Sri Ajit Dovalji concluded that the economic means constituted the best strategy for exercising our influence in Sri Lanka. He proposed that a cartel of Indian industrialists should establish industries in Sri Lanka using their raw materials and sell their finished products at cheap prices. The Sri Lankan industries will not be able to withstand this trade onslaught. Thus Sri Lanka will become entirely dependent economically on India and we can easily protect and promote our interests there.

The Secretary of the Vivekananda Kendra International, Shri Mukul Kanitkar addressed the vote of thanks to the distinguished audience and the speaker.

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