

ANALYSIS

SRI LANKA

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IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

When Sri Lanka's brutal civil war ended last year it was noteworthy in several ways – including a rare if not unique example of a Government defeating a long-running insurgency and the related issue of China openly taking sides in a distant internal conflict. In fact it was China's policy – which emerged in full light in 2008 – to back the Government in its 25-year struggle with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that enabled a military victory two years later.

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Colombo's decision to boycott the Nobel Prize ceremony in Oslo last December is as political as the decision by Norway to award the Nobel peace prize to Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese dissident in the first place. It was inevitable that Sri Lanka should be drawn into this contest given the crucial role played by China in helping Colombo annihilate the Tamil rebels.

Until this Chinese intervention, Sri Lanka was inexorably tied to the Indian orbit. During the Cold war when India was aligned to the Soviet Union, it ensured that Sri Lanka remained outside the Western camp or for that matter countries India regarded to be inimical to her own interests. In the early 1980s when a right-leaning Sri Lankan Government attempted to court the West, New Delhi armed and trained Tamil militants to exert pressure on Colombo. Consequently, by 1987, India was able to persuade Colombo to sign the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord acknowledging India's pre-eminence as the regional power. As a result Colombo

remained within the Indian orbit despite the Northeast of the island coming under the control of the fiercely independent and single-minded Tamil Tigers.

But since the end of the cold war Indian influence has progressively declined. In 2002, the West steadily increased its influence beginning with Norway brokering a Cease-Fire between Colombo and the Tamil rebels. Western involvement was further enhanced when the EU, Japan and the US underwrote the peace process and collectively declared themselves to be the co-chairs of the peace process. However, with the election of the stridently anti-Western Mahinda Rajapakse as President in 2005, the West was sidelined as Sri Lanka moved close to China. China reciprocated by assisting Sri Lanka in its war against the Tamil rebels. India

chose to back Colombo in a futile attempt to prevent Colombo coming entirely under Chinese embrace. It was China's unqualified help that ensured this victory. According to Wen Liao, a China observer, the most remarkable aspect of Sri Lanka's recent victory over the Tamil Tigers was not its overwhelming nature, but the fact that China provided President Rajapaksa with both the military supplies and diplomatic cover needed to prosecute the war.

Sri Lanka's increasing closeness to China and its alienation from the West underpin a serious shift in the emerging new world order where China regards itself as the power to counter the US-led west. It no longer subscribes to its earlier model of 'peaceful rise'. Indeed, it has been argued that it was on Sri Lanka's beachfront battlefields that China's "peaceful rise" ended giving way to a for more assertive posture.

An assertive China is a cause for concern not only to the US but also to other international

powers – most notably India. This concern is compounded by the fact that China now has untrammelled access to the most strategic location in the Indian Ocean – the island of Sri Lanka. There is a growing consensus that during the twenty-first century as the Indian Ocean emerges to be the centre stage, the US, China and India will compete for control and influence. India cannot help but be wary of the growing capability of China's navy and Beijing's growing maritime presence. Then there is the strategy known as a 'string of pearls' which has involved China building bases in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka encircling India in the process. In Sri Lanka, the port at Hambantota sits directly astride the main east-west shipping route across the Indian Ocean denying India the advantage it had hitherto taken for granted.

Given this scenario, it comes as no surprise that India and the US should seek to align themselves. More than an inkling that such an alliance was in the making was foreshadowed when Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary, of US State Department announced on 30th September 2010 that India was the United States' "indispensable" partner for the 21st century and was of "strategic importance to the United States". Earlier Under Secretary of State, William Burns had announced that India and America now mattered more to one another. During President Obama's visit to India in November, the Indian Prime Minister and the US President reaffirmed this position by describing the India-US. Strategic partnership to be indispensable not only for their two countries but also for global stability.

Sri Lanka's Chinese connection places it in the eye of the storm as India and the West seek to re-assert their influence in the Indian Ocean