

# Has India Abandoned Its 'Monroe Doctrine'?

by Ramtanu Maitra

The keystone of New Delhi's regional policy during the 1970s and 1980s was its deep-rooted suspicion of foreign powers meddling in the region. In November 1988, when President Maumun Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives (a cluster of islands in the Indian Ocean and a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation), fighting off a coup, had sought Indian assistance, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sent 1,600 troops within 24 hours to restore order in the capital, Male. That operation, much discussed over the years, was indicative of India's determination to respond against potential foreign involvement in its vicinity, which New Delhi always considered its sphere of influence.

The 1971 intervention by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to form Bangladesh out of East Pakistan, however, was borne out of a different policy. Formation of Bangladesh was primarily to weaken Pakistan, a nation which remained hostile to India since their inception in 1947, and thus to diminish the potential for conflict in India's east.

Rajiv Gandhi's punitive actions against Nepal for the monarchy's dalliance with China, and his demand on Sri Lanka in 1987 not to give military bases to any external power, were other examples of New Delhi's determined efforts to dictate policy to these nations to ensure India's physical security.

## Change in Attitude?

However, it seems things are changing, albeit slowly. The Atal Behari Vajpayee Administration has become less reactive and, in effect, more accommodating to foreign nations' participation in conflict-management in the region.

What appears to be a shift in India's attitude was noticed recently in the cases of Nepal and Sri Lanka, two small nations adjacent to India. They were zealously protected by New Delhi as its virtual adjuncts throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But now, India has allowed the United Kingdom to play a role in helping to bring Nepal's civil war-like situation to an end. Washington has also joined the fray, by backing the Nepali monarchy and its army against the fast-growing Maoists. India has not responded negatively to these interventions.

In Sri Lanka, India intervened first on behalf of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in the early 1980s, and then shifted its position to back Colombo

against the marauding Tamil Tigers. India even sent troops to Sri Lanka to disarm the Tigers. Sabotaged from within, that mission failed miserably, and the disastrous intervention in Sri Lanka showed how warring groups in a neighboring country would seek to draw India into their internal conflicts on one side or the other, and eventually target India itself as the threat.

Since the May 1991 assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Tamil Tigers, India disassociated itself from the goings-on in the Sri Lankan civil war, and in effect, backed the Sri Lankan government against the Tigers. But, again, the objective of New Delhi's policy at the time was not to ignore the Tamil discontent against the Sri Lanka government in Colombo, but to bring to the resolution process only those who were keen to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the two-decades-old conflict. Early this year, when the Norwegians came with a proposal to negotiate between the two warring factions, India welcomed the initiative.

In the long-disputed State of Jammu and Kashmir, however, India has maintained its earlier position, which says that the more than 50-year-old dispute with Pakistan will be resolved only through bilateral dialogue. But there are also indications that India is not unwilling to seek the assistance of the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom to exert pressure on Pakistan to create an environment for beginning a meaningful dialogue. Are these, then, signs of India's weakness, or helplessness or tiredness? Or, is it a new-found confidence?

New Delhi interprets the shift in none of those terms. It is evident to New Delhi that it has no real reason not to allow others to apply pressure on both the Tigers and Colombo to give up their failed policies, or to allow the Nepali Army to receive U.S. military assistance in its efforts to defeat the Maoist extremists. In essence, New Delhi considers this new policy as an application of good, common sense.

## Sri Lankan Imbrolio

New Delhi's role in the Sri Lankan conflict over the years is a subject of much heartache in India. While the majority of Indians acknowledge the legitimacy of ethnic Tamil grievances, the threat posed by the Tamil Tigers in the region is also understood. The Tigers, who were once trained, sheltered, and supplied with ground intelligence by the Indian intelligence outfits, have become one of the most ruthless terrorist groups in the world. Its large diaspora, and its vast financial and physical network, have drawn into its fold the Indian Maoists in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, and a number of powerful secessionist groups operating in India's Northeast. The Tamil Tigers have also developed a vast drug-and-gun network, which includes such anti-India groups as Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

India's interest in keeping Sri Lanka under its security fold was not a product of the Cold War. As far back as 1945,

Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India's first Prime Minister following India's independence from British rule in 1947, was enunciating the thesis that since Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was culturally, racially, and linguistically as much a part of India as any province of the Subcontinent, the island should join the Indian federation. There was, however, no active effort made later to form a confederation with Sri Lanka.

In 1985, when Rajiv Gandhi became India's Prime Minister, New Delhi began to crack down on militant camps on Indian soil, while attempting to negotiate a Sri Lanka-Tamil militants peace agreement. The attempts failed, until India agreed to take on a proactive peacekeeping role in the conflict. Under the terms of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, India sent a peacekeeping force to the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The plan was to demilitarize the area and place it under an interim provisional administration until elections for a joint provincial administration could be held.

The Accord came under severe criticism inside Sri Lanka, and Colombo was accused of surrendering its sovereignty under pressure from a powerful neighbor. Riots broke out against the Sri Lankan government. At the same time, the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) found out that the Tigers were in no mood to disarm, and were ready to confront the Indian troops. Colombo, in its effort to subvert the Accord it had co-signed, began using the Tigers as an excuse to bog down the operation. There was no doubt that Colombo was providing the Tigers with arms and intelligence, to kill off the peacekeeping forces and humiliate the Indian Army.

Though the IPKF was targetting only the Tamil separatists, hostility among the ethnic Sinhala majority to the IPKF presence mounted steeply and, following elections in late 1988, the Sri Lankan government, under President Ranasinghe Premadasa, asked the IPKF to withdraw when their mandate expired in early 1990. Amid growing domestic and international criticism, New Delhi brought back the troops with a firm resolve not to return. The LTTE assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 effectively made the Tigers sworn enemies of India.

Almost ten years later, in 1999, when Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga again asked India for military aid, the Indian government provided her with all possible support short of military aid.

The current cease-fire, and the Norwegian-brokered peace talks set to start in the coming weeks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, represent the best hope for peace in Sri Lanka in seven years. The Norwegian-brokered peace effort was wholly supported by New Delhi, and India has made clear that it would not participate in the peace talks. It is nonetheless evident, as exemplified by Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe's recent visit and regular interaction with New Delhi, that continuing Indian support for the peace talks is imperative for their success.

## The Nepal Crisis

Earlier, the mainstream security thinking in India was focussed on the task of maintaining Indian autonomy in an international order that was thought to contain a would-be hegemonic power, the United States. A related security goal had been to limit the ability of the United States and China to intrude into the affairs of India and its immediate neighborhood. That neighborhood includes Nepal, and India's policy had earlier been the maintenance of Nepal as a buffer between itself and China.

Nepal is now engaged in a bloody civil war. The war involves the rural Maoists, who are also gaining ground in urban areas, and the monarchy. A weak parliamentary system, brought about with covert assistance from India in 1990, has achieved little more than to reduce the absolute power of the monarchy. But the internal quibbling among the political groupings has kept the political parties from playing a significant role in the conflict.

New Delhi is deeply concerned about developments in Nepal. The well-armed Nepali Maoists have developed strong links with the Indian Maoists in the bordering Indian state of Bihar, and also with foreign terrorist groups such as Shining Path of Peru and the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement of the U.K. There were also reports of the Pakistani ISI

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exploiting the volatile situation to create further problems in India's ill-governed northeastern states and in Bihar.

Nepal is a landlocked nation whose access to the outside world is through India and China. Too much Indian involvement in Nepal has created strong anti-India lobbies in that country. In fact, the Nepal Maoists have openly addressed India as their main enemy. They also accuse India of conspiring with the monarchy to keep Nepal within its fold and of providing a staging ground for anti-China activities.

The anti-India activities in Nepal center around a number of issues, the most important of which is the 1950 Treaty of Friendship that deals with all aspects of Indo-Nepali relations. Nepalis feel that this treaty was imposed on them in 1950, when Nepal was not a democracy, and India acted as the colonial successor of the British. During their recent meeting in New Delhi, the Nepali and Indian Prime Ministers asked their foreign secretaries to look into this matter and submit their proposals within six months.

In addition, the approximately 1,800 kilometer Indo-Nepal border adjoining the Indian states of Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal is of great concern to both countries. For Nepal, trafficking in drugs and terrorist activities top the agenda, whereas India is concerned with the trafficking of drugs and women, smuggling, illegal trade, and large-scale immigration from Nepal. Nepalis living in border districts also complain about migration from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh into Nepal, in addition to criminal elements taking refuge and creating problems in their country. Other issues, mostly dealing with the sharing of Nepali river water, have muddied Indo-Nepali relations.

### **Why India Shifted Its Policy**

Several factors might have played a role leading to New Delhi's shift in dealing with foreign involvement in its region. To begin with, India never succeeded in fully implementing its version of the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan successfully resisted this from the outset, and drew the United States and China into the regional equation. The U.S. involvement in the region was largely guided by Cold War considerations of containing communism and the former Soviet Union in Asia.

Over the decades, Beijing has developed an "all weather" partnership with Pakistan. China's ties with India's other neighbors, too, have steadily expanded over the decades, with or without India's acquiescence. Unlike China, Russia, which is both an Asian and European power, was willing to defer to Indian sensitivities in the Subcontinent.

Add to this the fact that India has not succeeded effectively in resolving conflicts in its neighborhood. That may not have been wholly due to the inadequacy of India's foreign policy or its policy implementation, but, nonetheless,

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1. U.S. President James Monroe's doctrine, which was written for him by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, sought to block the European monarchies from meddling in the affairs of the Americas.

it did not succeed. Meanwhile, its efforts to maintain control over the much smaller, and militarily and economically weaker nations have resulted in a growing resentment against New Delhi and made India's regional policymaking even more complex. It is no surprise that anti-India lobbies have consolidated themselves in every one of India's smaller neighbors.

Second, one of the most frequent causes of South Asian conflicts during the Cold War, was the exacerbation of intra-regional tensions by the United States and the Soviet Union. Washington and Moscow sought South Asian partners and favorable balance of power arrangements in the region. Therefore, disputes like that in Jammu and Kashmir were intensified and prolonged, as South Asian governments counted on extra-regional backing for their rigid positions and to enhance their military capabilities.

Now, the world has changed, and India cannot hope to keep the other great powers out of the region. As every one of the South Asian nations seeks cooperation with the rest of the world, the economic presence of other countries, China in particular, will rapidly grow in the region. As nationalism and independent identities grow among India's neighbors, the old ways of doing political business in the region are not going to work.

Third, the American military involvement in the region after Sept. 11 has brought the issue of terrorism to the fore, and is the common concern of large nations in the region. India has made some immediate gains, in the form of the ouster of the Pakistan-controlled Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and of increased U.S. pressure on Pakistan to give up cross-border terrorism across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.

One should also not underestimate the growing economic and political ties between India and China. India's Nepal policy was often based on its fear of a Chinese threat—some of it imaginary, some of it real. In recent years, both Beijing and New Delhi have taken significant measures which ensured peace and tranquility along the disputed India-China border, and have laid the foundation for an ultimate solution to the dispute.

Equally important is New Delhi's realization that India has an important economic role to play in Southeast Asia, and such a role will not be blocked by Beijing. Over the last three years, India has established strong links with Southeast Asian nations, particularly in Indochina. New institutions, such as the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have been set up, and India is playing a key role in the infrastructure development in the recently established Mekong-Ganga Development Cooperation.

It is likely, that as it begins to move outward and finds itself not rejected, New Delhi will be more self-assured and accommodating to all those nations that would like to establish peace in South Asia.