

Geo-Strategic Implications of Sethusamudram - Taraki Sivaram

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The Sethusamudram Project has generated some controversy again. The litany is that the project has far reaching strategic and economic implications for Sri Lanka. But few have elaborated on why it is so. The articles you see in the local press are largely on the adverse ecological impact it would have on Sri Lanka and its maritime environs.

The Sethusamudram Project has a very important geo-political dimension too. It would give India a firm grip on one of the world's most strategic and busiest sea-lanes. This would eventually give India very remarkable leverage in its relations with China, Japan and the US.

All the oil supplies to Southeast and East Asia that originate in the Middle East are shipped from ports in the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf. The sea-lanes from here converge in the Arabian Sea and then pass through the Gulf of Mannar and curve off the western, southern and southeastern coast of Sri Lanka.

This sea-lane then turns northeast through the Bay of Bengal towards the Malacca Strait. Eighty percent of Japan's oil supplies and sixty percent of China's oil supplies shipped on this sea-lane. Almost half of the world's container traffic passes through the choke points of this sea-lane and its branches in the Indian Ocean.

The Sethusamudram Project will create an unavoidable by-pass that would inevitably divert this sea traffic through India's own maritime waters. The strategic importance of this by-pass should also be understood in the light of New Delhi's ambitions for becoming the Indian Ocean's predominant naval power.

As we all know K.M Panikkar, the architect of India's naval doctrine, argued in his works more than fifty years ago that New Delhi should recognise the significance of the Indian Ocean for the development of its commercial activities, trade and security ('The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean' and 'India and Indian Ocean'- published in 1944-1945)

Regretting the "unfortunate tendency to overlook the Sea in the discussion of India's defence problems", Panikkar remarked: "India never lost her independence till she lost the command of the sea in the first decade of the 16th Century".

Advocating that the "Indian Ocean must remain truly Indian", Panikkar suggested the Albuquerque-style security of India by firmly holding distant places like Singapore, Mauritius, Aden and Socotra, the arid island off the coast of Yemen. He also emphasized broadening of the political hemisphere of the Indian State, so as to include Ceylon and Burma for defence purposes. Cautioning against the Chinese thrust, he wrote that the "movement towards the South may, and in all probability will be reflected in the naval policy of resurgent China".

In later years, another popular Indian author, K.B.Vaidya, in his work - 'The Naval Defence of India' - keenly supported the ideas of Panikkar. He said, "Even if we do not rule the waves of all the five oceans of the world, we must at least rule the waves of the Indian Ocean". He further emphasized that India must be supreme and undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean. He argued for the creation of three self-sufficient and full-fledged fleets to be stationed at the Andamans in the Bay of Bengal, at Trincomalee in Ceylon and at Mauritius guarding the western and eastern approaches to the Indian Ocean.

However, until the seventies India was largely pre-occupied with the defence and security of its mainland and invested little in naval power.

Two events at the time jolted defence planners in Delhi to take a more serious view of the Indian Ocean neighbourhood in terms of India's security.

One was the acquisition of Diego Garcia by the US and the other was America's decision to send the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal in December 1971 in a show of support for Pakistan during the Bangladesh war.

The first thing New Delhi did in reaction to these apparent moves by the US to assert its power in the Indian Ocean was to begin a process to legally define and settle all its maritime boundaries with countries to its south, east and southeast.

Delhi signed the first agreement with Indonesia in 1974, which settled the boundary between Great Nicobar and Sumatra. In 1977, the boundary line was extended both into the Indian Ocean and into the Andaman Sea by another agreement. In the same year, the boundary between India and Thailand in the Andaman Sea was negotiated and an

agreement was signed in June 1978, which entered into force in December 1978. In February 1978, the tri-junction point between India, Indonesia and Thailand was settled at official level in Jakarta.

The agreement was signed in June 1978 and came into force in March 1979. The maritime boundary agreement with Myanmar was ratified in 1987. The maritime boundary agreements with Sri Lanka were concluded in 1974 and 1976 (Maritime Zones Law, No. 22 of 1976). A tri-junction treaty defining the boundaries of Maldives, Sri Lanka and India was also signed during this period. (The dispute between India and Bangladesh over New Moore Island came to nought after it was swept under the sea)

And parallel to this, India, with the support of its ally USSR, began a campaign for a nuclear free Indian Ocean. The campaign was aimed at preventing the US from developing Diego Garcia into a major base for nuclear weapons. Sri Lanka supported India during the Non Aligned Movement summit in Colombo in 1976 to adopt a resolution criticizing the US for developing a nuclear weapons base in Diego Garcia.

However, New Delhi's naval ambitions remained somewhat muted until the fall of the Soviet Union, which had provided a safety umbrella to India in the larger Indian Ocean theatre.

But today India feels that it has to defend itself on its own. In recent years the importance of sea-lane security has become paramount in the thinking of Indian naval strategists. New Delhi's plans for rapid economic growth depend on a safe, uninterrupted supply of energy to feed the country's burgeoning industry and fast expanding automobile market.

(Energy Security is a relatively new discipline in India but is fast catching on among a handful of strategic thinkers in Delhi) Therefore the Strategic Defence Review of Indian Navy, published in 1998, stipulated four specific tasks for the immediate future:

- 1) Sea based deterrence
- 2) Economic and energy security
- 3) Forward presence and
- 4) Naval diplomacy. The four tasks are interconnected.

One of the main reasons why countries develop and maintain large navies is to defend or dominate sea-lanes that are vital to their survival. Nations that have blue water navies are in a position to control sea-lanes, junctions and choke points (straits) in all the oceans of the globe (A navy with trans-oceanic sailing power is called a blue water navy. A navy that can patrol the immediate oceanic neighbourhood off its maritime zone is a brown water navy)

New Delhi has been able to postpone massive investments in a blue water navy by developing the natural forward defences in either side of peninsular India - in the Lakshadweep Islands in the Arabian Sea and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

The Malacca Straits is the second busiest sea-lane in the world. And most of the ships approach the Straits through the 10-degree channel, which bisects the Andaman Islands from the Great Nicobar Islands.

Therefore Delhi has made huge investments in developing its forward military presence on the islands as it gives it dominance over the second busiest sea-lane choke point. The strategic importance of the islands has been a historical fact.

During negotiations for India's independence, the Muslim League demanded that the Andaman islands should be an integral part of Pakistan for geographical and strategic reasons. It expressed the fear that if India controlled the islands and the vital sea-lanes, India could prevent the Pakistani ships from sailing from West Pakistan to East Pakistan. It must also be pointed out that sections in the British Defence establishment wanted the islands to be detached from India.

They wanted the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to be made into a separate Crown Colony, which would, in turn, safeguard the strategic interests of the far-flung British Empire. However, this did not materialise due to stout opposition from Nehru who had Mountbatten's support on the matter.

The responsibility for the security of the Bay of Bengal, including Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and also the waters extending to the six littoral states in the region - Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka - was vested for a long time with the Indian Navy's Eastern Naval Command based in Visakhapatnam.

In August 1998, New Delhi decided to establish a Far Eastern Marine Command at Port Blair in Andaman, independent of operational control from Visakhapatnam. The idea was further modified in favour of a Joint Service Command in October 2001. The Command will be headed by the three Services in rotation and will function directly under the Chief of Defence

Staff of the Indian armed forces.

There are plans in New Delhi to develop Port Blair as a strategic international trade centre and for building an oil terminal and trans-shipment port in Campal Bay (Great Nicobar islands) to cater to increasing maritime trade in the region.

India, while thus consolidating its forward position and grip on the entrance of the Malacca Strait, ensured that no external power could dominate the vital sea-lane further southwest in the Bay of Bengal by signing the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA). The Letters of Exchange in the ISLA preclude anyone except India from using Trincomalee - a strategic port necessary for dominating the sea-lanes that emanate from the Malacca choke point.

However, quiet moves by China since the late eighties to develop safe line of energy supply from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea set off alarm bells in Delhi. India appears to fear this line of supply defined by the strategic facilities that China has developed along this route could give Beijing naval advantage in the region. This concern should be seen in the light of the fact that China has developed naval facilities on the Greater Cocos Island, which is part of the Andaman Archipelago but belongs to Myanmar.

China has built a naval base in Bandar Abbas on Iran's coast on the northern side of the Hormuz Strait in the Persian Gulf. (One need not elaborate on the importance of the Hirmuz Strait to world oil trade).

Further east on the Pakistan coast China is building a dual-purpose naval facility in Gwador. The next stop on this line of supply are Maldives and Sri Lanka.

China negotiated a deal with Maldives from 1999 to build a base in Marao one of the largest islands of the 1192 atolls that make up Maldives. It lies 40 kilometres from Male. The base deal was finalised after two years of negotiations when Chinese PM Zhu Rongji visited Male on 17 May 2001 on his four nations South Asian tour.

The Marao base will not be operational until 2010. Beijing will use Marao Island for 25 years on lease and pay back Maldives in foreign currency.

An Indian defence reporter, sounding the alarm at the time, wrote: "Coral islands make fine submarine pens. The People's Liberation Army - Navy (PLAN) proposes to deploy nuclear submarines fitted with sea launched Dong Feng 44 missiles and ballistic missiles in Marao" (Curiously, the official organ of a pro-Chinese Tamil party launched a tirade against me for mentioning the Maldives base deal in passing in my column for the Sunday Virakesari)

In Sri Lanka China has developed relations with Colombo in recent years with an obvious eye on the petroleum industry. Ceylon Petroleum Corporation signed an agreement with Huanqiu Chemical Engineering Corporation on December 4, 2000 for the construction of an oil tank farm in Muthurajawela. It was expected to double Sri Lanka's petroleum storage capacity within three years. The Chinese company built 29 tanks along with a single point buoy mooring system to unload oil from tankers without having them enter the port. The Chinese company was also repairing six more tanks in Kolannawa which were damaged in an attack by the Tigers in October 1995. Chairman of the CPC at the time Anil Obeyesekere said that his Corporation had started talks with the Chinese on expanding Sri Lanka's oil refinery and joint venture in petrochemical industry.

We have witnessed how India moved swiftly to counter China's hand in Sri Lanka's petroleum sector. It is diminishing the effect of a strategic link in China's energy supply through the Indian Ocean.

The Sethusamudram Project would help India overcome many of these concerns and worries about holding the power balance over the strategic sea-lanes in its hands in this part of the world.

The Sethusamudram sea bypass might divert one of the world's busiest sea-lanes into India's strategic stranglehold.

This is the context in which we in Colombo should examine the geo-political implications of Sethusamudram for Sri Lanka. And no one can ignore Jaffna's proximity to the project.