

# BROOKINGS

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Teresita C. Schaffer and Howard Schaffer | April 2, 2013 11:06am

## When India's Foreign Policy Is Domestic



***Editor's note: Teresita Schaffer has started work on a book called India at the International High Table. The book, co-authored with Howard Schaffer, will examine how India sees its role in the world, and how this translates into India's negotiating style. This article, co-authored as well, discusses the impact on Indian foreign policy decision-making when an international issue becomes a factor in domestic politics.***

In the past six months, passionate domestic politics have twice taken over India's foreign policy process, complicating its relations with neighboring countries. The most recent case involved a resolution on Sri Lanka adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which led an important coalition partner to leave the government. The earlier crisis, in September 2011, scuttled two major features of India's proposed expansion of relations with Bangladesh. When India's foreign policy becomes domestic, decisions tend to escalate, coalition politics intensify, and the fallout affects both politics and policy.

The Sri Lankan story began in 2012, when Washington sponsored a resolution intended to press for accountability for the anguishing events that took place at the end of Sri Lanka's civil war. The text was very mild, recommending that Sri Lanka take a number of measures that it had already more or less pledged. India's surprising "yes" vote reflected pressure not so much from the United States as from a handful of politicians from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, who were concerned about Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Indian foreign policy professionals were unhappy over this departure from their normal

practice of not voting for country-specific resolutions.

The second act took place at the March 2013 UNHRC meeting. The United States sponsored a somewhat sharper Sri Lanka resolution. "Requests" became "urgings" and the text called on Sri Lanka to heed not just the recommendations of its own government-appointed Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission but also reports from the United Nations.

The drama in India, however, was substantially greater than last year. The absence of any significant movement toward national reconciliation left Indian foreign policy professionals frustrated (like their U.S. counterparts), and the release of film footage reportedly showing the killing of the Tamil rebel leader's twelve-year-old son, created widespread revulsion in India. But what really drove events was the rivalry between two Tamil parties that alternate in running the state government. The Sri Lanka conflict is deeply embedded in this contest, and both parties use their alliances and disputes with the party in power in Delhi to further their quest for state primacy. The DMK, allied with the central government but opposed to the state government, mounted a full-court press to demand that India not just vote for the resolution, but amend it to accuse the Sri Lankan government of "genocide and war crimes." This fit in with the DMK's traditional sympathy for the now-defeated spearhead of Sri Lanka's Tamil uprising, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It also was an opportunity for the DMK to outdo its rival, the AIADMK, in support for their brothers in Sri Lanka.

The DMK took its campaign on the road. A debate in the national parliament produced no consensus, but drew public statements blasting Sri Lankan anti-Tamil "atrocities" from a parade of government ministers as well as Sonia Gandhi, president of the ruling Congress party. The Government of India cancelled the upcoming India-Sri Lanka defense dialogue. A DMK-led organization reportedly lobbied foreign embassies in Delhi to toughen the resolution. The DMK then pulled out of the government coalition, citing the U.N. resolution. This put the government's existence in technical danger, though the DMK hinted that it would not bring the government down. Not to be outdone, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (from the other major Tamil party, the AIADMK), banned Sri Lankan cricket players from participating in an upcoming match in Chennai.

Unusually, India's UNHRC representative was summoned to Delhi, and returned to Geneva with instructions – evidently from the top – to try to toughen the resolution. This last-minute effort went nowhere. On March 21, the resolution passed with 25 positive votes, 13 negative ones and 8 abstentions – compared to last year, one more yea, and two fewer nays. India had once again overridden its normal distaste for country-specific resolutions, and India and Sri Lanka were left with some difficult fences to mend. Last year's Sri Lankan anger was mostly against the United States; this year, India was the principal target. There is every likelihood that the same issues will be back again at next year's UNHRC

meeting.

The Bangladesh case also involved a regional party and former ally of the Indian government, and was in some ways even more dramatic. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Bangladesh in September 2011. In preparation, the two governments had worked out a package of agreements to resolve many of their oldest and most complex disputes. These included settling a border that includes nearly 200 enclaves on both sides that are under the sovereignty of the other, division of the waters of one of their shared rivers, transit for India to areas east of Bangladesh, and expanding trade. The Indian government thought it had the acquiescence of the provincial government in West Bengal, headed by the feisty Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress, mercurial former allies in the central government coalition.

They reckoned without Banerjee. A week before the prime ministerial visit, she denounced the water sharing agreement. The central government dispatched a star senior diplomat, National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, to pour oil on the troubled waters in Kolkata. He failed. Among many competing explanations, two stand out: Menon had no authority to provide sweeteners for the financially strapped West Bengal; and he was not an elected politician, much less one Banerjee would consider her equal. In addition, it is not clear that he could help Banerjee address the local impact of the proposed agreement within West Bengal.

Banerjee's opposition nearly scuttled the whole trip, to both sides' great embarrassment. The overture to India was Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's signature foreign policy issue. She reluctantly agreed to implement the salvageable parts of the program. The two governments continued to work on the water issue and the transit agreement that Bangladesh had withheld in retaliation. In February, Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid visited Bangladesh and opined that the problems would be resolved. He was followed by President Pranab Mukherjee, India's most senior Bengali politician.

Bangladeshis of different backgrounds and politics tend to blame the Indian bureaucracy for their problems with India, and hope that politicians – especially Bengali ones, and especially Mukherjee – will provide solutions. The view from Delhi and Kolkata is more complicated. The personalities of the political leaders in Kolkata and in Dhaka emerge as a critical factor. The long-time Communist chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, had his state's politics in the palm of his hand. Political observers in Kolkata told us that this enabled him to take a statesmanlike view, as he had in shaping the 1996 India-Bangladesh water agreement. Banerjee is less secure in her political hold on the state. She is also a "street fighter," determined to eliminate any threat to her West Bengal power base, either from the communists or from her former allies in Congress. This makes for a natural tension with New Delhi.

Indian observers ruefully agree that the next move is up to New Delhi. The government faces an uphill task in obtaining parliamentary assent to the constitutional amendment it needs to implement the border agreement. Obtaining the support of the West Bengal government for the water and transit deals is probably becoming more difficult.

Despite their different dynamics, these cases have important features in common. Both featured high-octane local political leaders in India, and both had deep roots in state politicians' volatile relations with the central government. Domestic politics swept aside the normal foreign policy process, making decisions and follow-up unpredictable. When foreign policy issues are taken up by party politics, decision-making rockets to the top of India's power structure. Domestic deal-making becomes the primary requirement. India's foreign policy machinery cannot control that – or the international bargaining that goes with it. India's foreign policy institutions are starting to maintain stronger state level contacts in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. However, as we saw in both these cases, when there is a political dispute over policy toward Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, contacts between senior officials or ambassadors and the state government are mainly useful as an early warning system. They are unlikely to be able to resolve problems.

Some foreign policy issues get caught up in party politics without the direct local identification that marked these two cases. Recent examples include the U.S.-India nuclear deal, frozen for nearly a year because of the leftist parties' objections, and the Indian government's initial decision to permit foreign direct investment in retail trade. Such issues are less likely to revolve around one high profile opponent, like Tamil Nadu's Karunanidhi or West Bengal's Banerjee. But they share the other characteristics of the boundary between foreign and domestic politics, including escalating the locus of decisions. They will become more frequent as India's economy grows and its integration with the global economy becomes more important.

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Anjaan • 14 days ago

It is wrong to state that the US India nuclear deal is frozen due to non cooperation of the leftist parties in India. The deal came dead on arrival, as the Americans managed to kill the intent and spirit of the deal by inserting a number of poison-pill amendments, that were specifically designed to rob India of its sovereignty, and bringing India into the NPT through the back door.

The people of India are not fools ..... why blame the left parties alone ..... ??

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