**The dubious national interest**

BY J A W E D N A Q V I 2021-03-02

GEN Pervez Musharraf was returning from a strategic meeting in Colombo when Nawaz Sharif overplayed his hand. He interdicted the army chief`s flight, and set off a chain of events the former prime minister would be ruing now in faraway London. Last week, Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Sri Lanka in as close an embrace with its leaders as the coronavirus permitted.

There was a time when Sri Lanka banked on India, and Indira Gandhi did help Sirimavo Bandaranaike defeat a Sinhalese chauvinist insurrection against her government in 1971. In the living room of one of Sirimavo`s daughters is a framed picture of a joyous Nehru hoisting one of her children in the air. Mrs Bandaranaike was close to Marshall Tito and Zhou Enlai but her heart was always ready to slam criticism of her friendship with India.

It was a while before stridently pro-Washington Junius Jayewardene would allow the Americans to instal a VOA transmitter on the island, which Mrs Gandhi, given the Cold War alignments, vehemently opposed. Someone subsequently advised Rajiv Gandhi to mediate in the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic bloodbath and he gullibly sent Indian troops to keep peace between the two. Both ditched him. A Sinhalese army cadet struck Gandhi with the butt of his rifle during a guard of honour in Colombo.

Then a Tamil suicide bomber from Jaffna blew him up during an election rally near Chennai.

Khan`s visit to Colombo last week was projected as routine but there was always going to be more to it. Pakistan had helped the Sinhalese government with arms and military credit to meet the challenge from Tamil separatists. India, hugging national interest, looked on silently. Not that Pakistan deserves applause. One recalls not getting a straight answer at a press conference with Musharraf in Islamabad. He was asked why Pakistan supported what Indians see as Kashmiri separatism while opposing its Tamil variant in Sri Lanka. Musharraf mumbled that the two situations were different but didn`t say how.

Who decides the national interest, and, thereby, which separatism to support, which to oppose? Leaders declare war, suspend civil liberties, and even without the nicety of declaring emergency canthrow opponents into jail, all in the national cause.

Every critic of the Indian government, particularly the current one, becomes a foreign agent or worse a closet Pakistani. Critics of the Pakistani government are called Indian agents.

National interest is often a personal fiefdom.

Indira Gandhi ran a kitchen cabinet of a dozen men and women who watched over India`s national interest in imposing the emergency. Rahul Gandhi claims four men are currently running the country, two excessively powerful politicians and two excessively rich businessmen. If true, which is not unlikely, the foursome wears the thinking cap for a country of a billion-plus to decide the national interest. Farmers are aggrieved over new farm laws, but the foursome perhaps determine the protesters arewrong and not worth heeding. Occasionally they can get it right, like the DGMOs meeting to resume the ceasefire.

After the fire and brimstone of recent days, there`s one logical explanation to the twist in the national cause. Has the Biden administration recommended the resumption of the stalled Saarc summit? No harm if American national interest becomes the trigger for eight other countries to tweak their national interest in a peaceful compact.

The Chinese can`t be averse to the idea of Saarc resuming either. The Modi government though will have to invent a good reason to put the sword in the scabbard where Pakistan is considered. National interest is a malleable commodity, nevertheless.

Karan Thapar`s interview with former Indian diplomat Shiv Shankar Menon revealed a consummate intellectual that Menon is. But he also said worrying things about watching India`s nationalinterest. Menon was disparaging of the running commentary most Indian media and assorted analysts delight in offering on the make-believe ringside view of the tricky China-India stand-off. It`s early days in the rollbacl( of troops, was Menon`s cryptic watchword sans vestigial emotions. But then he cautioned India against ruffling the feathers of Myanmar`s military usurpers. He cited national interest. It`s not that Modi`s India was waiting for the advice. It has already gone down that route, duly concerned that any criticism of the junta could give a clear advantage to China.

The two-timing national interest would be tested for India this month in Geneva, where the UN Human Rights Council is holding its 46th regular session. It is expected to decide the fate of a critical resolution against Sri Lanka. The first draft was circulated recently and the vote takes place in the last couple of days of the session, ending on March 22.

The draft resolution, submitted by the Core Group of the United Kingdom, Germany, Malawi, Montenegro and North Macedonia, responds to a damning report released by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on Jan 27.

This report was formally presented to the UN Human Rights Council on Wednesday, Feb 24, followed by member states offering their views over two days. At the meeting, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena had called on the member states to reject the draft resolution.

In comments to The Hindu on Saturday, Sri Lanka`s foreign secretary, retired Admiral Jayanath Colombage, sought India`s `proactive` support in Geneva. `India cannot abandon us,` Colombage stressed. He hoped that India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh who are among members of the current human rights council will back Sri Lanka.

History tells us how Pakistan would vote. Colombo senses trouble from India, not for rigorous principles of human rights, but because the state of Tamil Nadu will be going to polls in a few weel(s. The national interest that evoked a muffled inanity over the coup in Myanmar, could be pressed into service with equal alacrity, in the opposite direction. The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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