**A wakeup call**

Maj-gen (r) Muhammad Saad Khattak

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A lot has been rightfully written and said about the success story of the Pakistan-Sri Lanka friendship ever since Pakistan’s independence. Sri Lanka, as a smaller island nation with a larger, powerful and mostly hostile neighbour was always challenged in maintaining a balanced foreign policy successfully. Doing so over the years has indeed been the success of the superior diplomatic skills of the Sri Lankan leadership and diplomatic corps.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations immediately after Pakistan and Sri Lanka gained independence in 1947 and 1948, both countries were drawn closer due to the similarity of challenges and the geo-strategic threat that both nations faced from a hostile India. Internal strife, ethnic cleavages and the Indian-supported Tamil insurgency exacerbated the Sri Lankan situation, as India remained determined to bring Sri Lanka firmly into its orbit of influence. To neutralise Indian coercive pressure, the island continued to look for friends that could extend it the much needed political, diplomatic and material support. None other than China and Pakistan could come to the island's aid, which at one time was on the verge of defeat and disintegration during its deadly war against the Tamil Tigers (LTTE).

The 'time tested and all weather friendship' between the two has, however, remained mainly security-centric with less than desired complimentary ties in other areas. This was inevitable given Sri Lanka's security vulnerabilities that formed the basis of Pak-Lanka bilateralism. Pakistan still fondly acknowledges Sri Lankan logistic support to Pakistani jets during the 1971 war with India, despite Indian reactions and fury. This was fully reciprocated by Pakistan in Sri Lanka’s hour of need much later in the war against the LTTE.

Having won the Tamil insurgency in 2009 with crucial help from China and Pakistan, and the world having moved from geopolitics to geo-economics, it was required to realign our policy vis-a-vis Sri Lanka, which sadly has not been done. Sri Lanka is embracing the new realities by focusing on geo-economics, endeavouring to reach out to potential contenders interested in utilising its geostrategic position for mutual benefits.

In the Sri Lankan calculus, Pakistan is a pleasant reference to the past and with little potential for the future. A relationship that is not constantly nurtured by the needs of the time becomes irrelevant, stale and forgotten. Pakistan needs to infuse newer dynamics into its ties with Sri Lanka to remain relevant and keep this vital ‘Listening Post’ positively engaged and functioning. We need to go beyond the ‘security alliance’ which in the Sri Lankan calculus is a matter of the past. Of late Pakistan’s focus on extended tourism – especially niche religious tourism – is a ray of hope in the right direction.

Expecting Sri Lanka to break away overtly from the Indian orbit and support us in unequivocal terms on various issues like Kashmir etc is not knowing the Sri Lankan reality. India's embrace of the tiny island nation – although not liked – is feared, and suffocating and grudgingly accepted. The challenges to Pak-Sri Lanka ties, therefore, can be recounted in a few ways. First comes diminishing relevance. The current Sri Lankan dispensation has clearly indicated its leanings towards India on numerous occasions, indirectly indicating towards our diminishing relevance. Denying the opportunity to our PM to address the Sri Lankan parliament during his visit in February 2021 (despite initially planned) under Indian pressure is indicative of Lankan preferences of not antagonising India.

The newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is yet to visit Pakistan although he made his Indian yatra within a month of his taking oath. Not congratulating Pakistan even through a symbolic tweet on our recent Independence Day and being prompt and forthcoming on similar occasions with India surely carries a message. Similarly, the occasional procedural barriers and imposition of additional taxes on Pakistani products, making these more costly for our exporters and Sri Lankan importers is clearly succumbing to Indian pressure with not too discreet motives

Pakistan, on its side, still in its archaic mode has unconditionally responded to all Sri Lankan calls in critical times – no questions asked. Pakistan's critical support at UNHRC Geneva, where Sri Lanka finds itself in the dock frequently, over Tamil genocide and other related charges against the LTTE, is the latest in the long list of Pakistan’s magnanimity and friendship.

The second challenge is the inability of the two governments over years to correspondingly expand the relationship to other areas of common potential and interests despite a solid foundation. Whereas Sri Lanka has other preferred and more attractive choices available, our layback attitude is clearly at the cost of losing our existing space that remains under constant assault and perpetual threat from India.

The third challenge is that the ‘Look West’ preference by our decision-makers and the bureaucratic elite in Islamabad will cost Pakistan its long-term interests dearly. Leaving smaller and assumed less important countries to the missions alone, with hardly any guidance and direction, can at best be termed unprofessional on the part of responsible quarters in the Foreign Office. Such attitudes are especially pronounced with those missions where the ambassadors/high commissioners are ex-officers, strictly and legally appointed under the constitution.

Sri Lanka being an important regional country deserves much more attention and priority at the leadership levels through deliberate and regular interaction and at ministerial levels to tap the true bilateral potential. We need to have a foreign minister whose attention is not divided between his exceptionally demanding assignment and domestic politics. And a foreign secretary who can provide effective leadership and guidance to the missions through his telephonic availability when needed for timely decision-making.

The window of opportunity may not be available for too long as other contenders of greater potential are looking for the space our predecessors have acquired with sustained efforts. Diversification of the relationship to other areas is needed such as religious tourism, extending credit line in areas other than security, education, Information Technology, more frequent military/ academic/ cultural exchanges, expanding trade to non-traditional sectors, services, investment and textile manufacturing using Sri Lankan niche in value addition for mutual benefit.

The Colombo Mission’s capacity in manpower and resources also needs a review. It would be unfortunate not to build on the available goodwill and criminal to lose our hard-earned space to our adversaries.

The writer is a former high commissioner of Pakistan to Sri Lanka.