

## India, Sri Lanka play same old game

NEW DELHI

The subcontinent's peculiar brand of peace descended upon Sri Lanka in highly appropriate fashion two years ago, when a naval officer stepped from the guard of honor at the Indo-Lankan accord ceremony and crashed his rifle butt over the head of visiting Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Needless to say, most of the subsequent agreements, pacts, resolutions and understandings have struck that same note of deep mutual respect and profound friendship.

Last Friday's desperate final-hour accord — narrowly averting a military showdown over India's refusal to withdraw its 45,000 troops — was certainly a victory for the forces of reason, received with great sighs of relief on both sides.

But, as usual, a sober second look reveals that nothing was truly decided. The two sides merely agreed to step back from the precipice and talk things over. Within hours each was furiously claiming victory and plotting strategy for the next round of a protracted struggle.

The first impression Friday was that Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa had gone eyeball to eyeball with Mr. Gandhi, and forced the Indian Prime Minister to blink. The two governments announced that India had agreed to "recommence withdrawing" its troops and hold discussions on a timetable to wind up operations. Almost immediately, 600 Indian soldiers set sail for home.

But appearances can be deceiving. Here in New Delhi, there is much chortling over India's perceived diplomatic victory: forcing Mr. Premadasa to back away from a confrontation in return for the token gesture of a 600-man pullout.

No Indian commentator or official apparently believes that anything more than that was promised or will be delivered until Sri Lanka makes concessions over the Tamil population in areas now under Indian military control.

In high-level talks here in the past two days, Indian Foreign Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao made clear that further withdrawal is linked to devolution of powers.

Meanwhile, Indian peace-keeping forces on the island continue their war against the Tamil



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Tiger guerrillas.

Both actions are diametrically opposed by President Premadasa who has demanded a pullout without any links or trade-offs, and has ordered that India respect his own government's month-old ceasefire with the Tigers.

"Maybe it's just because we're looking at it from New Delhi," shrugged one astute Western diplomat here yesterday. "But it is hard to see what the Lankans gained from (Friday's) agreement."

India promised only to begin its pullout; one boatload of soldiers accomplished that.

Still, New Delhi can hardly afford to send Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne home, from the talks empty-handed. That would be a signal for the quixotic President Premadasa to tilt yet again at Indian windmills. And, despite a 50-to-1 disadvantage in size, his tiny island is not without options.

Colombo can simply abrogate the one-sided 1987 treaty that brought Indian forces into the country, recall its high commissioner from Delhi, or take the issue to the United Nations Security Council — any and all of which would cause Mr. Gandhi great problems in this Indian election year.

And President Premadasa's history of feisty Sinhalese nationalism has left few who still doubt that he is indeed prepared to push India to the wall.

"Mr. Premadasa has shown a remarkable tactical resilience," as one reluctant admirer in the Colombo diplomatic community puts it. "The majority view here is still that we are headed for disaster. But I wouldn't write off Premadasa just yet. He is a man of considerable resources in the game of brinkmanship."

Which happens, by no coincidence, to be precisely the game India and Sri Lanka have insisted on playing for the past two years.