

Withdrawal Dilemma

IN diplomacy there are no short cuts. That is an age-old lesson that New Delhi and Colombo should clearly have taken note of when putting their signatures to the Indo-Sri Lanka accord 23 months ago. India plunged into its military misadventure in Sri Lanka on the mistaken but emphatic belief that the Indian Army would quickly wipe out the Tamil Tigers; that President Jayewardene, who co-signed the accord, would still be in power and under moral obligation to safeguard the accord. And, above all, that it would be a perfect springboard for the projection of India's military might.

Jayewardene's successor, President Premadasa, also ignored the lesson, but at much greater peril. He has attempted to find every available short cut to peace on his troubled island and, in the bargain, painted himself—and his country—into a corner. His latest gambit—threatening to take his demand for a total withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) by July 29 to the UN—is a display of panic not pragmatism.

There is another related age-old adage that both sides should have taken note of: that diplomacy is often the art of the impossible. In a situation like the Sri Lankan imbroglio, there has always been one guiding principle for the profusion of protagonists—my enemy's enemy is my ally. Thus, the surprising turn-about that has seen the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government supping at the same peace table has a historical impetus of its own.

But what that situation has provoked is a classic diplomatic dilemma. Should India withdraw its soldiers from Sri Lanka? The Americans faced it in Vietnam; chose not to, and paid a heavy price. The Soviets faced it in Afghanistan; took a hard decision to lose face, and turned withdrawal into a propaganda victory.

But in India's case, there is a crucial difference. The presence of around two million Tamils in northern and eastern Sri Lanka adds a complication that renders the dilemma acute. For staging a withdrawal by the stipulated date, even if physically possible, would leave the Tamils, still haunted by their sufferings at the hands of the Sri Lankan armed forces, totally defenceless.

At one level, there is a powerful case for pulling out the IPKF. In diplomatic terms, and under the conditions of the accord, New Delhi will find it difficult to earn any international approval if it refuses to pull out. The accord clearly states: "An Indian Peace Keeping contingent may be invited by the President of Sri Lanka to guarantee and enforce the cessation of hostilities, if so requested." Thus, Premadasa occupies the moral high ground in that particular confrontation.

There are other equally powerful compulsions. The IPKF, it is now obvious, cannot achieve the objective it was given—breaking the military back of the Tigers. There is frustration,

anger and a visible loss of morale within the ranks of the IPKF that has spread to a major part of the Indian Army as a whole. It has lost almost 1,000 soldiers and officers. More seriously, as Indian officers now admit in private, the frustration has led to increasing indiscipline and even acts of brutal retaliation. To allow this to continue will mean paying a heavy price in terms of discipline and morale of the Indian Army.

That New Delhi realises the need to effect a withdrawal is also evident. It was Rajiv himself who made it clear at the army commanders' conference last April that the Government was quite keen to withdraw the bulk of the IPKF as soon as possible. In fact, some withdrawals had already taken place. But that was before Premadasa jumped the gun and made his unilateral demand for a total pull-out by July 29, the second anniversary of the accord.

By his ill-judged act, Premadasa has made any possible compromise solution well nigh impossible. New Delhi can now hardly make a meek withdrawal without losing considerable diplomatic and military face. More so, with general elections around the corner. Doing so would also mean leaving the Tamils vulnerable to the blood-bath that would surely follow as the Tigers wage another armed assault for supremacy against the other Tamil groups and hundreds of innocent victims are caught in the cross-fire.

New Delhi is also well aware that any deal between the LTTE and Premadasa will have to include granting the former political

dominance over the northern province. This again will be perforce unacceptable to New Delhi, it having refereed the Provincial Council elections that brought the pro-India EPRLF grouping to political power.

There are also domestic imperatives inherent in the stands of both governments. Premadasa's political survival is now in serious doubt as his country slides closer to anarchy. As for Rajiv, the coming elections will undoubtedly play a major role in his ultimate response.

And it is a response that requires careful thought and adroit diplomatic tightrope-walking. A refusal to withdraw by India will only reinforce the belief in Colombo that New Delhi would like to maintain a permanent military presence on the island.

The best possible path for New Delhi is to agree to a phased withdrawal which will see a majority of the troops out of Sri Lanka by November, when Colombo hosts the SAARC summit. In the meantime, Colombo can be arm-twisted into ensuring that a Tamil police force is trained and deployed to offer security to the civilian population in the north-east. This will also allow both sides the opportunity to save face and satisfy domestic compulsions. Any other tack would drag Delhi and Colombo into a confrontation that neither side can afford.

Illustration by AJIT NINAN

