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**India and the Civil War in Sri Lanka:  
On the Failures of  
Regional Conflict Management in South Asia**

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# **India and the Civil War in Sri Lanka: On the Failures of Regional Conflict Management in South Asia**

## **Abstract**

The paper provides an assessment of India's role in the final years of the civil war in Sri Lanka (2003-2009). In particular, it looks for explanations for India's inability to act as a conflict manager in its own region, which is in contrast to predominant assumptions about the role of powerful regional states. It also seeks to explain the surprising turn in India's approach to the conflict, when in 2007 New Delhi began to rather explicitly support the Sri Lankan government—in disregard of its traditional preference for a peaceful solution and its sensitivity for the fate of Sri Lankan Tamils. While historical and domestic pressures led to India's indecisive approach during the years 2003-2007, starting from 2007 regional and international factors—most notably the skillful diplomacy of the Sri Lankan government and the growing Chinese presence there—induced New Delhi to support the government side in order to keep some leverage on Sri Lankan affairs. The analysis of the Sri Lankan case opens several avenues for further research in the fields of regional conflict management and foreign policy analysis.

Keywords: India, Sri Lanka, conflict management, civil war

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Indien und der Bürgerkrieg in Sri Lanka:**

#### **Zum Scheitern des regionalen Konfliktmanagements in Südasien**

Der Aufsatz analysiert Indiens Rolle im Bürgerkrieg in Sri Lanka in den Jahren 2003 bis 2009. Im Mittelpunkt der Untersuchung steht einerseits Indiens Unfähigkeit, als Konfliktmanager in seiner eigenen Region zu handeln; dies widerspricht den theoretischen Annahmen zur Rolle mächtiger Staaten bei der Beilegung von Gewaltkonflikten in ihrer eigenen Region. Andererseits erklärt der Beitrag den überraschenden Wandel in Neu-Delhis Politik gegenüber Sri Lanka: 2007 begann Indien, die srilankische Regierung zu unterstützen, und entfernte sich somit von seiner traditionellen Präferenz für eine friedliche Lösung des Konflikts und von seiner früheren Sensibilität in Bezug auf das Schicksal der Tamilen Sri Lankas. Die unentschlossene Haltung Indiens zwischen 2003 und 2007 lässt sich durch historische und innenpolitische Faktoren erklären, während von 2007 an regionale und internationale Faktoren – vor allem die geschickte Diplomatie der srilankischen Regierung und der wachsende Einfluss Chinas – Neu-Delhi dazu bewegten, die srilankische Regierung zu unterstützen, um ein gewisses Maß an Einfluss in Sri Lanka zu wahren. Die Fallstudie zu Sri Lanka wirft eine Reihe von Forschungsfragen auf den Gebieten regionales Konfliktmanagement und Außenpolitikanalyse auf.

# **India and the Civil War in Sri Lanka: On the Failures of Regional Conflict Management in South Asia**

**Sandra Destradi**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Managing Regional Security
- 3 The Civil War in Sri Lanka
- 4 India's Approach to Sri Lanka during Eelam War IV
- 5 Explaining India's Inability to Manage the Conflict and Its 2007 Policy Shift
- 6 Conclusion

## **1 Introduction**

The civil war in Sri Lanka, which came to an end with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, has been internationalized since a few years after its inception in the 1980s (Oberst 2004).<sup>1</sup> While several actors around the globe were involved in this conflict in different ways, the actor most heavily and most consistently entangled in the Sri Lankan civil war has been India, the "regional power" in South Asia. Different kinds of negative security externalities (Lepgold 2003: 19–20) have affected India over the past few decades: the steady stream of Tamil refugees escaping the island, the formation of an LTTE network in the South of India and, most notably, the great interest in Sri Lankan af-

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 21<sup>st</sup> European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Bonn, July 29, 2010. I would like to thank Johannes Vüllers, Dr. Matthias Basedau, Prof. Peter Schalk, and Dr. Bert Hoffmann for their useful comments.

fairs displayed by the Tamil population of the state of Tamil Nadu. The years 2006-2009 were marked by the collapse of the ceasefire brokered by Norway in 2002 and by a gradual escalation of the war up until the military defeat of the LTTE. These events were accompanied by massive war crimes and human rights violations (ICG 2010), the displacement of thousands of people—mainly Tamils, and huge losses among the civilian population. Given such a dramatic situation taking place in close proximity to India and emotionally involving Indian Tamils living in Tamil Nadu—represented by parties belonging to the governing coalition in New Delhi—we would have expected regional power India to have acted decisively. In particular, we would have assumed that India would adopt conflict-management measures in order to prevent the escalation of violence in its immediate vicinity. In the case of Sri Lanka, this expectation would have been reinforced by India's tradition of involvement in Sri Lankan affairs, and since India has repeatedly emphasized its preference for a peaceful solution and a political settlement of the ethnic conflict. However, it turned out that India did *not*, in fact, act as a conflict manager and did not actively engage to stop the violence in Sri Lanka. Moreover, from 2007 on, the Indian government quietly supported the military offensive of the Sri Lankan government and even took a clear position against the investigation of war crimes by the United Nations Human Rights Council after the end of the hostilities in May 2009.

How can we explain, on one hand, this lack of influence on the part of the “regional power” India, which contradicts predominant assumptions about the ability and willingness of powerful regional states to effectively shape regional order and to take the initiative in the management of conflicts in their own region? And how can we make sense, on the other hand, of India's 2007 policy shift, which stands in contrast to its previous “hands-off” policy towards the war in Sri Lanka?

To answer these questions, this paper first discusses the basic assumptions of existing theories about regional conflict management and the foreign policy of regional powers (Section 2). Some recent approaches, which call into question predominant tenets about the ability of powerful regional states to actively and substantially influence events taking place in their adjacency, are discussed. Against this background, this paper proceeds as a systematic case study: Section 3 sketches the origins of the civil war and India's early involvement in it and outlines the main events in the final phase of the war (Eelam War IV). In Section 4, India's policies on the war in Sri Lanka during the years 2003–2009 are assessed, highlighting a shift that took place in 2007, when New Delhi started distancing itself from its previously neutral approach by supporting the military efforts of the Sri Lankan government. For the analysis of diplomatic statements, I carried out a qualitative content analysis of official documents, speeches, statements and parliament debates reported by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, while the press and secondary literature serve as sources for the assessment of India's “non-verbal” foreign policy. Several expert interviews carried out in India from October to December 2008 serve as complementary sources. Section 5 attempts to make sense

both of India's inability to act as a conflict manager and of this shift in India's policies by taking into consideration a range of historical, domestic, regional and international factors. Finally, Section 6 draws some conclusions and outlines some areas of further research for the study of the foreign policy of regional powers and for the field of regional conflict management.

## 2 Managing Regional Security

After the end of the Cold War, a remarkable shift in the distribution of types of armed conflict took place worldwide: with the end of great power overlay and the sudden disappearance of proxy wars, the largest number of wars took place at the intra-state level (Harbom/Wallensteen 2010). At the same time, since the 1990s we have observed a trend towards the regionalization of conflict-management initiatives (Alagappa 1995). This was related, among other factors, to the "overstretch" of the United Nations and the reluctance of the United States to get involved in conflict-management initiatives, especially in remote regions (Bercovitch/Jackson 2009: 122). As a consequence, the UN started promoting forms of "regional task sharing" (ibid.: 119-136)—delegating competences to regional organizations. However, in the case of South Asia, which lacks any kind of multilateral security arrangement because the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) explicitly excludes contentious and political issues from its areas of activity, "conflict management is essentially a bilateral possibility" (Bajpai 2003: 212). Under these conditions, in the absence of multilateral initiatives involving regional states, studies on regional conflict management would expect a "solo actor" to undertake some initiatives to deal with a conflict taking place in the region (Lepgold 2003: 17).

Most studies on "regional powers" would make a similar assessment. This growing body of literature deals with countries like Brazil, South Africa, India, China and Russia—states that have predominant power positions in their regions and that aspire to lead the region to which they belong (Flemes/Nolte 2010). The ability to influence their region has often been taken as a constitutive trait of regional powers (Østerud 1992: 12; Schirm 2005: 111; Nolte 2010: 889), which, thanks to their endowment with power capabilities, are considered to be able to determine not only the geopolitical delimitation of their region, its political-normative construction and regional governance structures, but also the regional security agenda (ibid.: 893).

According to both these approaches, India as the predominant country—the regional power—in South Asia and as a state directly affected by spill-over effects from the civil war in Sri Lanka should have played a prominent and active role in managing the Sri Lankan conflict according to its preferences. India's unequivocal preponderance of material power capabilities at the regional level, further strengthened by its geopolitical position as the center of a hub-and-spokes regional setting, would reinforce our assumption of India's ability to influence its region according to its wishes. In the vital policy area of conflict management, this should hold true even more, especially with a decades-long, bloody civil war at stake.

Some recent studies are more helpful when it comes to making sense of India's approach towards Sri Lanka. In dealing with regional powers, some authors have started acknowledging that "leadership" is only one of the qualities that a regional power can display (Frazier/Stewart-ingersoll 2010); that these countries can pursue different strategies in dealing with their smaller neighbors (Destradi 2010); and that different forms of "regional powerhood" can be established by dominant states (Prys 2010). Schirm (2010) and Flemes/Wojczewski (2010) have highlighted that leadership may be "contested" and that, in order to effectively "lead," regional powers depend on the support of followers. The most suitable theoretical development for addressing the puzzle of India's indecisive and passive approach to the escalation of the civil war in Sri Lanka comes from Frazier and Stewart-ingersoll's study on regional security (2010). While the authors argue that regional powers play a central role in conflict management in their region, they highlight that not only a range of "roles," but also different "orientations" can shape the behavior of dominant regional states. In particular, Frazier and Stewart-ingersoll highlight that regional powers may be proactive or reactive in dealing with security concerns in their region. These two orientations can be distinguished by the specificity and immediacy of the regional power's motivations: diffuse and long-term-oriented actions directed at influencing the regional security context are defined as proactive, while ad hoc responses to single events or actions are indicative of a reactive orientation.

In this paper I will apply these categories to the empirical analysis of India's role in the final years of the civil war in Sri Lanka (2003–2009). As we will see, historical factors related to India's previous failures in conflict management in Sri Lanka played a part in "pulling India out" of the war, while domestic factors related to Tamil Nadu's interest in the conflict continuously "pushed India in," leading to a reactive and indecisive policy. The shift in India's policies that took place in 2007 was determined by a range of factors at the regional and international level.

### **3 The Civil War in Sri Lanka**

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, rooted in the discrimination against the Tamil minority by the Sinhalese majority after the end of British colonial domination, turned into a full-fledged civil war in 1983. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, formed in 1976 under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, had by the early 1980s emerged as the main rebel organization fighting for the establishment of an independent state for Sri Lanka's Tamils in the island's Northeast. Their fight against the Sri Lankan state led to an armed conflict that lasted for 26 years. The war was marked by phases of high intensity (Eelam War I: June 1983-July 1987; Eelam War II: June 1990-January 1995; Eelam War III: April 1995-February 2002; Eelam War IV: July 2006-May 2009) interrupted by different efforts to find a negotiated solution, which failed altogether.



### 3.1 India's Early Involvement

India initially played a significant role in this conflict as Sri Lanka's dominant neighbor. In the early 1980s, the government of Tamil Nadu and the central government under Indira Gandhi had supported Tamil rebel groups by providing them with military assistance and training, and this all on Indian territory (Dixit 2003: 55; dos Santos 2007: 54). However, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, her son Rajiv (see below) took a more neutral stance on the issue and officially interrupted the military support for Sri Lankan Tamil rebels. Instead, India clearly assumed a conflict-management role and repeatedly attempted to mediate between the conflict parties in the 1980s (Rao 1988). The failed mediation efforts and the escalation of violence in Sri Lanka ultimately forced India to abandon its temporary neutral stance. In 1987, India intervened by airlifting supplies to the Jaffna Peninsula in the North of the island, thus breaking the blockade the Sri Lankan government had imposed there. The clear show of force inherent in this violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty induced the Sri Lankan government to subsequently accept India's conflict-management efforts: On July 29, 1987, secret negotiations between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments led to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA) and, shortly thereafter, India deployed its Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the North and the East of the island with the task of supervising the ceasefire and disarming the LTTE. The IPKF mission soon turned out to be the darkest episode in India's regional policy: The LTTE, which had not been invited to the ISLA negotiations, resisted being disarmed and started fighting the IPKF (Bouffard/Carment 2006: 162). After three years, given the increasingly evident failure of the IPKF, which was not adequately trained for a guerrilla war (Rajagopalan 2008), India withdrew its troops. The IPKF debacle deeply influenced India's approach to conflict management in the region by highlighting the limits of India's military power and the risks of interventionist policies. It is no coincidence that India hasn't attempted a military intervention in the region since, and that its Gujral Doctrine, based on the notions of non-intervention and non-reciprocity in relations with regional neighbors, was formulated just a few years later.

The second main event shaping India's policy towards the Sri Lankan conflict in the following years was the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi by a suicide bomber in Tamil Nadu in May 1991. After the Indian Supreme Court attributed the assassination to the LTTE as an act of revenge for the IPKF operation, the LTTE was classified as a terrorist organization in India, and its leader, Prabhakaran, became a wanted man in India.<sup>2</sup> The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi heavily influenced New Delhi's approach to the civil war in Sri Lanka, and presumably even more strongly influenced the approach of the Congress-led government in power from 2004 to 2009, if we keep in mind that Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia Gandhi, has been the president of the Indian National Congress Party since 1998, thereby

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<sup>2</sup> According to Devotta (2010: 46, 59), the LTTE also feared a re-election of Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister and wanted to avenge his assumed role in the dismissal of the DMK government in Tamil Nadu in January 1991.

contributing to the government's hostility towards the LTTE in the period analyzed. While the IPKF failure made any kind of military intervention impossible, the proscription of the LTTE precluded further diplomatic involvement by India as a mediator because it became impossible for New Delhi to have any direct contact with the Tamil Tigers.

In light of these events, which made any kind of Indian involvement politically impossible, from 1991 onwards, India was forced to pursue a "hands-off" policy towards the civil war in Sri Lanka. In the context of its more cooperative regional policy under the Gujral Doctrine, the Indian government accepted the involvement of external actors in Sri Lankan affairs. Starting in 2000, Norway acted as a mediator between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Eventually this mediation led to the signing of a ceasefire in 2002 and provided for the establishment of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), composed of "Nordic" states charged with monitoring the ceasefire. Despite its non-involvement, however, India kept a watchful eye on the developments in Sri Lanka and was continuously kept informed by Norway about the latest developments in the peace process (Höglund/Svensson 2009: 181).<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2 Eelam War IV

The so-called Fourth Eelam War resulted from a gradual breakdown of the 2002 ceasefire. Specifically, in April 2003 the LTTE announced its unilateral withdrawal from peace negotiations after it was excluded from a preparatory meeting of a donor conference taking place in the U.S., where the LTTE was categorized as a terrorist organization.<sup>4</sup> At least formally, the ceasefire survived for nearly five more years, but in 2004 an undeclared war between LTTE and government forces flared up again (HRW 2005). By July 2006, the ceasefire had de facto collapsed.

At the same time, the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as Sri Lanka's executive president in November 2005 in a coalition with hard-line Sinhalese parties constituted the precondition for a much tougher stance against the LTTE. Rajapaksa strengthened Sri Lanka's military capabilities and established a "highly personalized, authoritarian regime, in which extreme nationalist views [were] widely accepted" (ICG 2007: 21). Not only the LTTE displayed a willingness to provoke the government and to resume the war, but also the government seemed to be keen on a "fight to the finish" (Reddy 2006): "[w]hat was new in the Rajapaksa administration's approach was the goal of defeating, as opposed to weakening, the LTTE militarily and then making the LTTE irrelevant to any political solution to the ethnic conflict" (Uyangoda 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> At the same time, India refused to take part in multilateral initiatives regarding Sri Lanka, for example in donor conferences. As one interviewee put it, "at the donor conferences India was present as an observer but it would not join a multilateral agreement in its own region!" Interview with expert, New Delhi, November 25, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See "Exclusion from donors conference undermines peace process", TamilNet, April 4, 2003, at: <[www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=8673](http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=8673)> (May 25, 2009).

In an unprecedented military offensive, Sri Lankan government forces gradually re-conquered the territories under LTTE control—the East in 2007 and, step by step, also the Northern province. When the Sri Lankan military crossed the border of the Kilinochchi district, the displacement of a huge number of civilians—estimated to be as high as 200,000—began (Fuller 2009). On January 2, 2009, the city of Kilinochchi, which had been the Tigers' administrative capital since 1995, fell into the hands of the government forces after a long siege. Trapped between the advancing Sri Lankan armed forces and the retreating LTTE rebels, the civilians were used by the LTTE as human shields and subjected to “intentional shelling” by the government forces (ICG 2010: i). By mid-January 2009, the LTTE had been confined to a small jungle area in the Mullaithivu district, a space that continued to shrink up until the LTTE's military defeat and the death of its leadership in May 2009.

Not only was the final phase of the war characterized by massive violations of international humanitarian law on both sides,<sup>5</sup> but according to UN estimates, as of May 22, 2009, there were also at least 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka (UN 2009a). The civilians who managed to escape from the conflict zone were subject to a “screening” by the government, which feared that LTTE cadres might have mingled with the refugees. Approximately 250,000 IDPs were put in militarily controlled refugee camps, to which international aid agencies were given only partial access. Even though many countries pressured Colombo, they did not manage to induce a policy change on the part of the Sri Lankan government. China and Japan, along with Russia and Vietnam, prevented the UN Security Council from discussing the Sri Lankan issue, defined as an internal matter of Sri Lanka (Nessman 2009). And even India, as is illustrated in the following sections, supported the Sri Lankan government.

President Rajapaksa, strengthened by his military victory, quickly consolidated his power position by winning the presidential election of January 2010 and, with his party, the general election of April 2010. Rajapaksa repeatedly refused an international investigation of war crimes and human rights violations, as he argued they impinged on Sri Lanka's sovereignty (ICG 2010: 31). The Sri Lankan regime, in the meantime, has been assuming increasingly authoritarian traits, exemplified by the power concentrated in Rajapaksa's family's hands, an almost total lack of press freedom (Schlütter 2010: 1), about 10,000 Sri Lankan citizens being held for over a year for assumed involvement in LTTE activities (ICG 2010: 31), an increasingly militarized governance culture (Senanayake 2009: 824), and no signs of willingness to find a political situation providing for a meaningful devolution of power to the Tamil minority.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account, see ICG (2010).

#### 4 India's Approach to Sri Lanka during Eelam War IV

At the beginning of the period analyzed, India refused to act as a conflict manager in the Sri Lankan war and followed the same approach it had been pursuing since the proscription of the LTTE after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated: a strict policy of non-interference. However, despite its unwillingness to be dragged into the conflict again or to contribute to its solution, India was not indifferent to what happened in Sri Lanka. Besides keeping an eye on the unfolding of events, India also had some clear preferences for the resolution of the civil war. Since the 1980s, when it had tried to mediate a compromise in Thimphu (Bouffard/Carment 2006: 168), New Delhi had been interested in a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Despite the failures of the agreement of 1987 and of the IPKF deployment, those two undertakings had also aimed to achieve a peaceful settlement. Similarly, during the years of Norwegian mediation, the goal of "lasting peace" became a standard formulation in India's declarations,<sup>6</sup> confirmed by India's quiet support for the peace process. And from 2003 to 2009 India repeatedly expressed the goal of a "negotiated political settlement" encompassing forms of power devolution meeting "the aspirations of all communities."<sup>7</sup> More specifically, India had a clear preference for the "unity, sovereignty and integrity" of Sri Lanka,<sup>8</sup> which was related to New Delhi's fear of secessionist spill-over effects on single Indian states, most notably in Tamil Nadu. In the statements issued between April 2003 and May 2009, a more concrete reference to the kind of arrangement favored by India emerged only once: "the unity of Sri Lanka in a federal system."<sup>9</sup>

Overall, in line with the less-intrusive regional policy pursued since the 1990s, throughout the time span analyzed India was anxious not to give the impression of interfering with the internal affairs of Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, its diplomatic efforts to persuade the Sri Lankan government to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict were carried out in an extremely moderate tone in the years 2003-2006, rarely reaching the level of actual diplomatic pressure. Things changed slightly in the period 2007-2009, when the escalation of violence in Sri Lanka and the growing pressure from Tamil Nadu induced New Delhi to put some degree of pressure on the Sri Lankan government concerning its approach to civilians in the war. On October 6, 2008, Indian National Security Advisor Narayanan summoned the Sri

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India, *India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement*, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, MEA, *Working visit of H.E. Mrs Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, President of Sri Lanka from November 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004*, November 2, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> This formulation was reiterated in MEA statements throughout the years 2003-2009 with small variations.

<sup>9</sup> MEA, India, *External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh in joint press conference with Lakshman Kadirgamar, Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka*, May 31, 2004. Moreover, India offered to share its "constitutional experience" with Sri Lanka. See MEA, India, *On the visit to India of President of the Government of Spain and Foreign Minister of Argentina, visit of Foreign Secretary to Sri Lanka and response to questions on Indian fishermen in Pakistan and sale of F-16s by US to Pakistan*, July 3, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> "It [India] believes that an enduring solution has to emerge purely through internal political processes." MEA, India, *India-Sri Lanka, Joint Statement*, October 21, 2003.

Lankan deputy high commissioner to protest Sri Lanka's conduct of the war,<sup>11</sup> and ten days later, India actually made an explicit (though unspecified) threat, when the external affairs minister stated that India would "do all in its power" in order to improve the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup> Despite this hardening of political rhetoric, however, New Delhi refrained from making its threat more compelling, let alone enforcing it. India's half-hearted attitude was met by the Sri Lankan government with an appeasement policy characterized by reassurances about the "safety and wellbeing of the Tamil community" and by minor concessions,<sup>13</sup> while the military campaign against the Tigers continued unabated, without concern for civilian losses.

While at the level of diplomatic interactions India continued to reiterate its preference for both a peaceful termination of the civil war and a political settlement of the underlying conflict, it did not attempt to devise long-term-oriented conflict-management initiatives. Instead of pursuing a proactive policy of engagement, India resorted to an ad hoc response to the course of events by radically changing its policies: In 2007 India began to abandon its rigorous non-involvement approach and started to take an indirect but highly significant role in the military conflict. This new approach was manifested, on one hand, in the crackdown on LTTE networks in Tamil Nadu, which helped the Sri Lankan government in its fight against the Tigers, and, on the other hand, in the provision of military hardware, mainly in the form of "defensive" equipment, and in other forms of military cooperation with the Sri Lankan government.

Because of the political pressure from Tamil Nadu, open military support for Sri Lanka in the fight against the LTTE was a taboo for India. Even though India had removed Sri Lanka from its blacklist for arms exports in the aftermath of the 2002 ceasefire agreement (Sambandam 2003b), there was a clear commitment on the part of New Delhi not to export "offensive" weapons to Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government, for its part, had always been interested in gaining India's military support in its fight against the LTTE and had tried to promote the idea of a defense-cooperation agreement.<sup>14</sup> However, due to the political pressure from Tamil Nadu, the deal was ultimately not finalized, and in 2005 India rejected a renewed offer of a defense pact made by President Rajapaksa (Reddy 2007). The Sri Lankan government's repeated proposals to jointly patrol the Palk Straits with Indian ships in order to limit the activities of the Sea Tigers were also clearly opposed by the Tamil Nadu state government.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> MEA, India, *On the summoning of the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner by the National Security Adviser*, October 6, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> MEA, India, *Statement by EAM on situation in Sri Lanka*, October 16, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> MEA, India, *On the telephone conversation between President of Sri Lanka and Prime Minister*, October 18, 2008; MEA, India, *India–Sri Lanka Joint Press Release*, October 26, 2008. In October 2008, for example, the Sri Lankan government gave in to Indian pressure and allowed an Indian ship carrying relief material for IDPs to call at the port of Colombo (Reddy 2008a).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, MEA, India, *On Bilateral Talks during the visit of the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka*, April 29, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See "Karunanidhi opposes joint patrolling of Palk Strait," *The Hindu*, October 5, 2008, at: <[www.thehindu.com/2008/10/05/stories/2008100555320800.htm](http://www.thehindu.com/2008/10/05/stories/2008100555320800.htm)> (October 13, 2009).

However, the discovery in 2007 of a huge weapons-smuggling network led to increased activities by the Tamil Nadu state police against the LTTE infrastructure in India (Hariharan 2007; Jayanth 2007). As a consequence of these operations, India declared its readiness to train the police personnel of the Tamil Nadu Coastal Security Group to patrol the Palk Straits and to increase surveillance along the maritime boundary.<sup>16</sup> In the years 2006-2009, the Indian and Sri Lankan navies carried out coordinated operations that led to the destruction of at least ten “floating warehouses” of the LTTE and considerably weakened the Sea Tigers (Gokhale 2009: 125). The Indian Navy was involved through reconnaissance missions and the provision of intelligence to the Sri Lankan Navy, which subsequently carried out the strikes (ibid.; Suryanarayan 2010: 172).

At the level of military hardware, India provided the Sri Lankan government with so-called life-saving equipment such as flak jackets, but also, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),<sup>17</sup> with an offshore patrol vessel in 2007 and, according to an Indian reporter, with five helicopters “quietly gifted” to the Sri Lankan Air Force in 2006 (Gokhale 2009: 121). The only publicly acknowledged provision of support consisted of two air surveillance radars needed to anticipate LTTE air attacks.

Most importantly, however, Sri Lanka was the single largest recipient of Indian military training (Cherian 2003),<sup>18</sup> and in 2008 India further extended the annual training slots for the Sri Lankan armed forces.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, an informal exchange mechanism between high-level Indian and Sri Lankan delegations (two of Rajapaksa’s brothers and his secretary, on the Sri Lankan side, and the national security advisor, the foreign secretary, and the defence secretary, on the Indian side) was reportedly established, and the two delegations met frequently in this capacity in the years 2007-2009 (Gokhale 2009: 122-123).

Overall, therefore, the assistance provided by India to Sri Lanka was “significant,” according to the International Crisis Group (ICG 2008: 20).<sup>20</sup> Despite the repeated calls for a negotiated political settlement of the ethnic conflict, it seems that India at a certain point started believing that the military solution adopted by Rajapaksa was the right way to deal with the LTTE. Several expert interviews carried out in New Delhi at the end of 2008 clearly reveal this attitude. Since the LTTE was a prohibited organization and its leader Prabhakaran was persecuted in India, the following attitude began to prevail, according to an Indian govern-

<sup>16</sup> See “Indian Navy Strengthens Surveillance Along Sri Lankan Border,” India Defence, April 4, 2007, at: <[www.india-defence.com/reports-3001](http://www.india-defence.com/reports-3001)> (May 29, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Information from the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, at: <<http://armstrade.sipri.org/>> (April 28, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Sri Lankan diplomat, New Delhi, November 24, 2008. Exact figures are difficult to find. According to Devotta (2010: 52), approximately 800 Sri Lankan officers are trained in India every year.

<sup>19</sup> See MEA, India, *Sri Lanka—Factsheet*, at: <<http://meaindia.nic.in/foreignrelation/srilanka.pdf>> (May 30, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> One of the experts interviewed even alleged that Indian support for the Sri Lankan military effort might have gone far beyond the provision of equipment and training, as listed above, and might well have included the covert participation of Indian forces in military operations or, at least, the supply of a broader range of weapons. However, there are no elements to confirm this allegation. Interview with expert, New Delhi, November 19, 2008.

ment official: “The process of destroying the LTTE is [...] a legitimate activity.”<sup>21</sup> Two other interviewees, a former Indian diplomat and a scholar, respectively state:

“We are basically supporting the Sri Lankan counter-terrorism.”<sup>22</sup>

“So the policy is ‘We will help you eliminate the LTTE but make sure that you keep the Tamils’ rights’.”<sup>23</sup>

This shift in India’s approach was made public, to a certain degree, in a statement by External Affairs Minister Mukherjee in January 2009, which basically legitimized the strategy pursued by the Sri Lankan government: “[...] military victories offer a political opportunity to restore life to normalcy in the Northern Province and throughout Sri Lanka, after [...] years of conflict.”<sup>24</sup>

This, mostly tacit, support by India for Sri Lanka’s military campaign fit New Delhi’s desire for stability and peace in the region—no matter how it was achieved. Beyond this, however, another—more significant—shift took place in India’s attitude towards the civil war in Sri Lanka. In fact, New Delhi started following President Rajapaksa’s approach also on issues directly affecting Sri Lankan Tamils, the modalities of devolution, and human rights.

Though External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh had expressed India’s preference for a federal solution in 2004, a remarkable shift in India’s attitude towards a convergence with the Sri Lankan government took place in 2008. After coming into office, Rajapaksa had established the All-Party Representative Committee (APRC), a body expected to elaborate a power-sharing package representing a “southern consensus” (ICG 2007: 22-25). Several drafts were elaborated by the APRC in 2007, one of them proposing the relatively progressive solution of devolving powers to the provinces.<sup>25</sup> However, the president managed to delay the release of the APRC’s final proposal (ibid.: 25) and ultimately induced the committee to give him only an interim report of its activities. This report, titled “Action to be taken by the President to fully implement relevant provisions of the present Constitution as a prelude to the APRC proposals,” was disappointing for all observers who had hoped for a real solution to the devolution of powers and was criticized by moderate Tamil representatives.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the report simply recommended that the government implement the 13th amendment to the constitution, a by-product of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement of 1987 which had never been put

<sup>21</sup> Interview with government official, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, November 20, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with experts, New Delhi, November 7, 2008, and November 18, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with expert, New Delhi, November 7, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> MEA, *Statement by the External Affairs Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee in Sri Lanka*, January 28, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of these different drafts, see ICG (2007: 24) and Reddy (2008g).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the interview with the leader of the moderate Tamil National Alliance (TNA) B. Sampanthan in June 2008: “I strongly believe that the 13th amendment is not a solution and never be a solution [sic] to the conflict because this was rejected by us in 1988, which is inadequate to address the grievances of the Tamils.” “All Three Communities Must Put Heads Together: Conflict essentially a problem of ours,” *Sunday Observer*, June 29, 2008, at: <[www.sundayobserver.lk/2008/06/29/pol06.asp](http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2008/06/29/pol06.asp)> (May 28, 2009).

into practice (Reddy 2008b). Interestingly, in January 2008 the Indian government defined the APRC interim report as a “welcome first step,” and in the following months New Delhi continued to call for its implementation.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, on the issue of power devolution we can observe a convergence between India’s and Sri Lanka’s preferences, with New Delhi adopting the position put forward by the Sri Lankan government.

After the end of the war, India also diplomatically supported Sri Lanka in international forums. On May 28, 2009, a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was held to investigate the reported war crimes and atrocities committed by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces. Two motions were discussed: one requesting an international investigation, and the other one elaborated by the Sri Lankan government, which urged the international community to support Sri Lanka’s reconstruction efforts. The latter motion, which “welcomed” the liberation of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians from the clutches of the LTTE but did not mention the shelling of civilians and the need to provide international organizations with access to IDP camps, was ultimately approved (UN 2009b). Not only China, Russia, Pakistan, and several Arab and African countries supported this motion, but also India voted for it. While this voting behavior corresponds to India’s traditional preference for non-involvement in other countries’ internal affairs, it again calls into question India’s concern about the fate of Tamil civilians and further highlights to what extent New Delhi came to follow the Sri Lankan government’s position.

## 5 Explaining India’s Inability to Manage the Conflict and Its 2007 Policy Shift

In an effort to explain not only why India did not act as a conflict manager in Sri Lanka but also why it changed its policy in 2007—abandoning its hands-off stance and its traditional support for Sri Lankan Tamils, and embracing the Sri Lankan government’s preferences—we will look at a range of factors. In fact, Indian policymakers were exposed to different kinds of pressures at different levels of analysis, but ultimately the skillful diplomacy of the Sri Lankan government and the growing influence of external actors, especially of China, in India’s sphere of influence induced New Delhi to “react” to events in order not to entirely lose its leverage on Sri Lanka.

### 5.1 Historical and Domestic Factors

As outlined above, the dismal failure of the IPKF operation and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi forced India to assume a “hands-off” approach and to remain on the sidelines. Any kind of conflict-management function became impossible for India to adopt: the military debacle of the IPKF precluded a renewed military intervention, while the ban on the LTTE pre-

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<sup>27</sup> MEA, India, *In response to a question on the recommendations of the All Party Representatives Conference in Sri Lanka*, January 24, 2008; MEA, India, *India–Sri Lanka Joint Press Release*, October 26, 2008.



vented India from acting as a mediator or as a facilitator to achieve a negotiated solution. Therefore, historical factors contribute largely to explaining India's inability to act as a conflict manager during Eelam War IV. At the same time, however, domestic political factors constantly dragged India into Sri Lankan affairs. In particular, the pro-LTTE attitude of some political parties in Tamil Nadu was further intensified by the composition of governing coalitions in India in the period analyzed. During the years 2004-2009, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), some of whose representatives had clear sympathy for the LTTE,<sup>28</sup> was the third-largest member of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government. In the final months of the war, the DMK's repeated threats to pull out of the coalition to induce New Delhi to exercise pressure for a ceasefire on the Sri Lankan government are an indicator of the DMK's strong interest in events affecting Sri Lankan Tamils—as well as of the DMK's influence (Murari 2009). However, this should not be overstated: the DMK's room to maneuver was limited, in fact, by coalition politics in Tamil Nadu, where the Congress played a vital role in supporting its minority state government (Devotta 2010: 48). This explains how Tamil Nadu's pro-Tamil politics influenced the central government and contributed to the latter's indecisive policies, but not to the extent of being able to prevent New Delhi's ultimate support for Rajapaksa's offensive. As we will see, this support was clearly related to other factors.

## 5.2 Regional Factors: Sri Lanka's Skillful Diplomacy

While historical constraints pulled India out of the war and domestic political factors pushed India towards it, the Sri Lankan government also had a strong interest in gaining India's support against the Tigers. The strengthening of economic ties and a policy of balancing with India's rivals China and Pakistan were the main tools employed by President Rajapaksa.

At the economic level, Indo-Sri Lankan relations had developed positively since the 1990s. In December 1998, the two countries had signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Bilateral Free Trade Agreement, whose outcomes—a surge in two-way trade, a reduction of trade imbalance, and, as an indirect consequence, an increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) (Kelegama/Mukherji 2007: 5-20)—greatly benefited Sri Lanka. In the field of development cooperation, Sri Lanka was one of the greatest beneficiaries of Indian grants and loans and took advantage of several Indian projects in the sectors of education, health, and infrastructure, as

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<sup>28</sup> It was only after the kidnapping and murder of some Indian Tamil fishermen by the LTTE in 2007 that DMK leader Karunanidhi clearly condemned the LTTE. See "Tamil Tigers humiliate India by killing Indians; Karunanidhi forced to act against pro-Tiger Vaiko," *Asian Tribune*, April 30, 2007, at: <[www.asiantribune.com/node/5513](http://www.asiantribune.com/node/5513)> (September 26, 2009).

well as of a three-year moratorium on Sri Lankan debt in June 2005.<sup>29</sup> India was the first country to dispatch aid to Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2004 (Price 2005: 15), even though New Delhi's engagement in that instance also had strategic reasons (a reaction to the deployment of U.S. armed forces for relief operations).<sup>30</sup> The Sri Lankan government, for its part, displayed a clear interest in "keeping India engaged" in Sri Lankan events by having greater stakes in the stability of the island—and, indirectly, a stronger interest in a military defeat of the LTTE. This point was explicitly highlighted by a Sri Lankan diplomat interviewed in New Delhi in November 2008: "By going in for economic cooperation and even integration, we are giving India a stake and interest in the sound economic and political health of Sri Lanka. That gives predictability to the relationship."<sup>31</sup> Beyond this, as mentioned above, the Sri Lankan government tried to foster a military cooperation with India.

These efforts related to India's economic engagement in Sri Lanka contribute to explaining the 2007 policy shift: India's exports to Sri Lanka doubled between 2004 and 2008 (UN 2008), and its total FDI in Sri Lanka grew from US\$ 54 million in 2003 to US\$ 126 million in 2008, with important companies like Bharati Airtel investing in Sri Lanka.<sup>32</sup> However, we need to keep in mind that the share of India's trade with neighboring states is minimal<sup>33</sup> and that, similarly, its outward FDI to Sri Lanka represents a minimal share of India's nearly US\$ 14 billion total outward FDI in 2007 (Athukorala 2009: 130). Therefore, India's sudden support for the government's military offensive and for its positions on power devolution and human rights should rather be explained by looking at international factors, chief among those being India's fear of losing influence over South Asia to China.

### 5.3 International Factors: Indo-Chinese Competition

In the context of China's growing involvement in South Asia (e.g., Scott 2008: 256-257), the Sri Lankan government greatly strengthened its ties with Beijing during the period analyzed. This occurred by means of economic cooperation, the construction of huge infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, and China's provision of weapons for the Sri Lankan government's fight against the LTTE. This gradual increase in Chinese influence in Sri Lanka clearly clashed with India's unstated goals of "having its say" in the South Asian region,<sup>34</sup> and "pre-

<sup>29</sup> Data on non-plan grants and loans from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs are reported in Price (2004: 13). See also MEA, India, *Sri Lanka—Factsheet*, at: <<http://meaindia.nic.in/foreignrelation/srilanka.pdf>> (May 30, 2009) and MEA, India, *Visit of External Affairs Minister to Sri Lanka, June 9–11, 2005*, June 9, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See "Sri Lanka tsunami aid becomes geopolitical game," LankaNewspapers.com, January 4, 2005, at: <[www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2005/1/135.html](http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2005/1/135.html)> (May 30, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Sri Lankan diplomat, New Delhi, November 19, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> High Commission of India, Colombo, *Investments and Development Cooperation between India and Sri Lanka*, at: <[www.hcicolombo.org/ecserv\\_indian\\_investment.cfm](http://www.hcicolombo.org/ecserv_indian_investment.cfm)> (October 8, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> In 2008, India's imports from the whole South Asian region amounted to just 5.1% of its total imports, and only 6.9% of its total exports were to South Asia (UN 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with expert, New Delhi, November 26, 2008.

vent[ing] a hostile power gaining a foothold in Sri Lanka” (Devotta 2010: 50). As a consequence, the factor that has most strongly impacted India’s reactive policy shift on Sri Lankan affairs is arguably Indo-Chinese competition for influence on the island.

There are several Chinese activities in Sri Lanka which seem to have contributed to this shift: One of them was the signing of an agreement between Sri Lanka and China in March 2007, according to which China would fund 85% of the construction of the port of Hambantota, in the South of Sri Lanka.<sup>35</sup> In order to secure its energy-supply lines, China has been courting some of India’s neighbors on the Indian Ocean to build ports and naval bases (Rehman 2009: 122): the Maldives, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar/Burma—and Sri Lanka. Significantly, it was in April 2007, shortly after the agreement on Hambantota, that the Sri Lankan government signed a secret deal with China for ammunition and ordnance supplies worth US\$ 37.6 million (Lunn et al. 2009). In fact, China clearly turned out to be the main provider of weapons for Sri Lanka in 2008, accounting for over 80% of total supplies.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, China reportedly supported the Sri Lankan government by carrying out intelligence operations against the LTTE (Devotta 2010: 50). Equally interestingly, Pakistan had also been providing the Sri Lankan government with weapons for several years and reportedly supported the Sri Lankan government in planning its offensive against the LTTE during the last months of the war. Pakistani pilots might have even flown jet fighters for the Sri Lankan Air Force, and in August 2008 the two countries elaborated a draft defense pact (ibid.: 49-50). At the military level, therefore, India’s readiness to cooperate with the Sri Lankan government from 2007 onwards can be related quite unequivocally to Colombo’s growing reliance on hostile countries for its weapons supplies. This is confirmed by the blunt statement India’s National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan made on May 31, 2007:

We are the big power in this region. Let us make it very clear. We strongly believe that whatever requirements the Sri Lankan government has, they should come to us. And we will give them what we think is necessary. We do not favour their going to China or Pakistan or any other country. [...] We will not provide the Sri Lankan government with offensive capability. That is the standard position. [...] [R]adar is seen as a defensive capability. If a country wants us to help them with defensive capabilities, we will provide them. That is our position.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Official Government News Portal of Sri Lanka, “Agreement signed on Hambantota Port”, March 12, 2007, at: <[http://222.165.136.66/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1945&Itemid=44](http://222.165.136.66/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1945&Itemid=44)> (August 17, 2010). The two countries had been negotiating on Hambantota since 2005, but the agreement was finalized in March 2007. See “Southern Sail,” *Lanka Business Online*, May 19, 2005, at: <[www.lankabusinessonline.com/full-story.php?nid=1455596075](http://www.lankabusinessonline.com/full-story.php?nid=1455596075)> (August 17, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> See SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, at: <<http://armstrade.sipri.org/>> (October 8, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> “Centre considering unified command for armed forces,” *The Hindu*, June 1, 2007, at: <[www.hindu.com/2007/06/01/stories/2007060108050100.htm](http://www.hindu.com/2007/06/01/stories/2007060108050100.htm)> (April 8, 2009).

To put it simply, India was interested in limiting Sri Lankan arms procurements from third-party countries and therefore preferred to fill the gap itself.<sup>38</sup> How can we explain, however, India's much broader support for Rajapaksa's course of action, which implied embracing the president's position on devolution and supporting the Sri Lankan motion at the UNHRC—at the expense of India's traditional support for Sri Lankan Tamils (Devotta 2010: 54)? Also in this case, the desire not to lose its influence in Sri Lankan affairs seems to have played a major role in New Delhi's foreign policy decision-making. China's influence in Sri Lanka, in fact, goes well beyond the provision of weapons and the construction of the Hambantota port: further infrastructure projects are being carried out, China has been awarded an exclusive economic zone, and it provides aid packages of US\$ 1 billion annually to Sri Lanka (Pant 2010). All this has led to efforts on the part of India to equally cajole the Sri Lankan government: "India is struggling to make itself more relevant to Sri Lanka than China" (ibid.). As a consequence, in 2008 India and Sri Lanka signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which is expected to boost bilateral trade flows (Devotta 2010: 52); also, since the end of the war, India has been contributing to reconstruction efforts and has provided relief material to the refugees (Reddy 2010). During a state visit by Rajapaksa to India in June 2010, India extended a line of credit of US\$ 200 million to Sri Lanka to set up a power plant, while at the military level, the two countries decided to establish an annual defense dialogue and to intensify high-level exchanges. In this way, India has partially accommodated Sri Lanka's long-standing requests for increased defense cooperation (Pant 2010).

## 6 Conclusion

India's approach to the final phase of the armed hostilities in Sri Lanka allows us to draw several important conclusions on the foreign policy options of regional powers as well as on regional conflict management.

First, this case illustrates the limitations a regional power may encounter in trying to influence a smaller state in its vicinity—the former's overwhelming dominance notwithstanding. In fact, India was not able to transform its traditional preference for a political settlement of the conflict and partial devolution of powers to the Tamil minority into reality. As we have seen, the Sri Lankan government was able, instead, to gain not only India's acquiescence but even India's *support* in its fight against the LTTE and in its challenging of the international community—partly contributing, perhaps, to a change in preferences on the part of New Delhi. The case of Sri Lanka reveals that we need to go beyond the purely regional and international factors cited by most studies on regional powers if we want to explain these countries' foreign policies: historical and domestic factors also need to be taken into account.

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<sup>38</sup> Concerning the radar mentioned by Narayanan, India managed to dissuade Sri Lanka from buying it from China and provided it itself (Reddy 2007a).

Second, we see that regional powers do not necessarily act as “leaders” in their regions, but may at times be forced by a range of factors to pursue rather reactive, ad hoc policies. From these first two points, a broader question emerges, one that goes well beyond the problem of the unwillingness of followers to follow. In fact, faced with empirical cases like South Asia, we might even ask “Do regional powers matter?” Less poignantly, we could investigate under what conditions and in what terms regional powers do matter—as leaders or rather as negative poles provoking opposition and resistance among their neighbors? These are questions that deserve further empirical investigation.

Third, if we look at the issue of regional conflict management, we can see that, in the absence of regional organizations operating in the field of security, the competition between a regional power and an external challenger (like China) or a major regional challenger (like Pakistan) may unleash a contest for influence detrimental to the achievement of a negotiated solution. If two or more third parties try to outdo each other in their support for one of the conflict parties, this can lead to an exorbitant strengthening of the conflict party’s position. In the case of Sri Lanka, where the beneficiary of this contest was the government, this might have increased its resolve to fight to the finish. Beyond this, India’s and China’s support provided the Sri Lankan government with important backing at the international level, reinforcing its course of action and helping it to deflect international criticism on the conduct of the war and on the post-war situation. The strengthening of the government also contributed to allowing President Rajapaksa to consolidate his domestic political position—the aforementioned erosion of democracy being one of many consequences.

Fourth, it seems that the adoption of a conflict-management role on the part of a regional power can take place only under favorable conditions at the domestic, regional and international levels. The systematic identification of those conditions constitutes a further important field of future research.

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