



Policy Brief

From IPKF to Today: Historical Wounds and Indian Military Interventions in Sri Lanka

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

India's military intervention in Sri Lanka started with the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987. It all started with a civil war in Sri Lanka due to the ethnic tensions between Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority groups. The IPKF was deployed in Sri Lanka to help disarm the Tamil militants, restore political devolution to Tamil-minority areas, and bring stability in the war-torn country. While initially considered as a peacekeeping mission, IPKF quickly engaged in direct military confrontation against the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It is a militant organization, founded in 1976, demanding an independent Tamil state to protect the Tamil population from the government's discriminatory policies. India's military confrontation resulted in widespread fatalities, human rights abuses, and a growing resentment among the Tamil population against India. The mounting pressure from Tamil Nadu province and Sri Lanka led to the withdrawal of IPKF's forces in 1990. It left deep scars on the memories of people which considered Indian intervention as a direct breach of Sri Lankan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite Indian Prime Minister Modi's influence on Sri Lanka's current leadership and the visible tilt of Sri Lanka towards India, the memories of the IPKF are still alive and Sri Lanka aims to maintain relations on principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty. Pakistan provided support to Sri Lanka during the IPKF presence in society, which was acknowledged by the Sri Lankan government. Pakistan should actively deepen its ties with Sri Lanka across diplomatic, economic, and cultural fronts, ensuring itself as a reliable partner in the region.

Policy Recommendations

- To counter the growing economic footprint of India in Sri Lanka, Pakistan should increase its trade and investment engagement with Sri Lanka, including a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA), encouraging joint ventures, granting preferential access for Sri Lankan exports to Pakistan's consumer market.

- Renewing defense cooperation is essential through counterterrorism expertise, information intelligence, and maritime security cooperation within the Indian Ocean region which is an area of strategic competition. Joint naval exercises between the two countries would help to diversify the security partnerships for Sri Lanka, reducing reliance on India. Training of army and airforce personnel should be made a regular feature to create goodwill for Pakistan.
- Tourism partnerships such as religious and heritage tourism, can be utilised to attract Sri Lankan pilgrims to Pakistan's Buddhist sites, while Pakistani tourists could be encouraged to visit Sri Lanka's cultural landmarks. By building strong commercial linkages, Pakistan can become a viable partner beyond India's shadow.
- Soft power and cultural engagement must also be strengthened. Pakistan may increase the scholarships for Sri Lankan students, while initiating Cricket diplomacy by inviting Sri Lankan teams for bilateral series in Pakistan.
- Pakistan must strengthen relationship with Sri Lanka at multilateral forums such as revival of SAARC. Closer coordination in such platforms will help counterbalance India's dominance and highlight shared concerns of smaller South Asian states. This collaboration would also enhance Pakistan's diplomatic outreach and credibility within South Asia.

From IPKF to today: Historical wounds and Indian military interventions in Sri Lanka

Overview

This brief explores India's military intervention in Sri Lanka through the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and the deployment of the IPKF. It examines how the mission, intended as peacekeeping, escalated into direct conflict with the LTTE; and how India's withdrawal in 1990 left enduring mistrust and reinforced Sri Lanka's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference. It further assesses the continuing relevance of these historical wounds despite Sri Lanka's growing ties with India. Finally, it underscores Pakistan's role during this period and recommends strengthening diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation to position Pakistan as a reliable partner.

Issue

To analyse India's military intervention in Sri Lanka through the IPKF (1987-1990) which left deep wounds and enduring mistrust that continues to shape Sri Lanka's perception of India's role in its internal affairs.

Analysis

The violent civil war between the Sinhalese government and the LTTE led to India's military intervention in Sri Lanka with the deployment of IPKF. At first, IPKF was viewed as a peacekeeping force to protect the Tamils, but its sudden shift towards violence and confrontation resulted in huge casualties, human rights abuses, and anti-India sentiment in Sri Lanka.

Historical Background: The Origins of Sri Lankan Civil War

The causes of Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) can be found in the deep-rooted ethnic divisions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority groups. The Sinhalese-dominated government implemented numerous discriminatory policies against the Tamils, including the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 making Sinhala as the sole official language of the country.¹ In reaction to severe marginalisation, Tamil demands for greater autonomy turned into calls for an independent Tamil state in the northern and

¹ Aftabuddin Ahammad, "India-Sri Lanka Conflict: An Overview," *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)* 6, no. 7, (2024): 906-912.

eastern parts of Sri Lanka. The LTTE, which was founded in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran, emerged as the most powerful militant group demanding an independent Tamil state or the Tamil Eelam.² The early 1980s saw increased violence and the outbreak of civil war between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil militants.

India's Military Interventions in Sri Lanka

The causes of the India's military interference in Sri Lanka dates back to the early 1980s. The 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, also known as Black July, caused widespread casualties and mass displacements.³ The grievances of Tamils in Sri Lanka resonated deeply in Tamil Nadu, as both share strong linguistic and cultural ties. In the initial years, India provided training and ammunitions to Tamil militant groups, including the LTTE. In 1987, a major offensive was launched by the Sri Lankan army against Jaffna, the stronghold of the LTTE. In face of a humanitarian crisis, India air dropped food to the Tamils over Jaffna, which indicated that they would not tolerate the mistreatment of the Tamil population. The anti-Tamil riots and political pressure from Tamil Nadu resulted in an agreement to end the conflict, which is the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, signed in 1987.

Indo-Sri Lanka Accord 1987: The Sri Lankan President Jayewardene signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on June 29, 1987. Under the accord, India deployed the IPKF in Sri Lanka to bring stability in a war-torn country. The main points of the accord were: an immediate ceasefire, disarmament of the militants, and the unification of northern and eastern provinces into a single administrative unit.⁴ The mission which came as a peacekeeper turned into a military operation against the LTTE who refused to disarm. The LTTE viewed the mission or accord as a threat to their goal of creating an independent Tamil state. The Tamils, previously viewing the mission as potential savior, also turned against it due to its mass atrocities.

Operation Pawan 1987: The conflict intensified with the launch of Operation Pawan by the IPKF in 1987 to capture the LTTE leader Prabhakaran in Jaffna region, the strong

² Aftabuddin Ahammad, "India-Sri Lanka Conflict: An Overview," *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)* 6, no. 7, (2024): 906-912.

³ Ahammad, 906-912.

⁴ B. Ramesh Babu, "Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: Anatomy of a Failure," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* Vol. 2, No. 3 (1998), pp. 132-145. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45064546?seq=1>.

foothold of LTTE. The IPKF faced strong resistance from the LTTE which escalated violence. One of the most horrible incidents during the peak of this operation was the Jaffna hospital massacre. It took place on 21 October 1987 when the Indian troops attacked the hospital, using grenades and shooting at the staff and the patients. This massacre caused the death of at least 68 civilians, including 21 medical staff.⁵ Another tragic event was the Valvettithurai massacre in August 1989 where several Tamil women were allegedly raped by Indian soldiers.⁶ The mass atrocities by the IPKF against the Tamils sparked outrage in Tamil Nadu and created a narrative of Indian betrayal. Thus, what began as a mission to protect Tamils, turned the IPKF into an occupation force.

Withdrawal of the IPKF: After the Jaffna massacre, the LTTE declared war against the IPKF as it failed to defend the Tamils from violent attacks by Sinhala and itself engaged in violence against the Tamils.⁷ The new President of Sri Lanka, Ranasinghe Premadasa, called for the immediate withdrawal of Indian armed forces from the country, viewing its presence as a violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty. Rajiv Gandhi's refusal presented the IPKF as a fully occupying force. It turned Premadasa towards the LTTE for a ceasefire with the Sri Lankan Army and even providing weapons to fight the IPKF. According to the Tamil militant leader Prabhakaran, India had its own agenda in Sri Lanka and Rajiv Gandhi had his own goals vis-à-vis party politics in Tamil Nadu.⁸ This unusual coalition and the electoral setback to Rajiv Gandhi sealed the fate of the IPKF. The newly formed V.P. Singh government ordered the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka in 1990, ending its brutal military intervention. The deep frustration of the LTTE against the IPKF led to the assassination of Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991. It was an evident sign of vengeance for IPKF's military operations against the LTTE.

End of the Civil War: After the withdrawal of the IPKF in 1990, the violent conflict continued between Sri Lankan government and the LTTE till early 2000s. The Sri

⁵ Eric Ouellet, "Institutional Analysis of Counterinsurgency: the Case of the IPKF in Sri Lanka (1987–1990)," *Defence Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011): 471-496.

⁶ Ouellet, 471-480.

⁷ B. Ramesh Babu, "Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: Anatomy of a Failure," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* Vol. 2, No. 3 (1998), pp. 132-145. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45064546?seq=1>.

⁸ Babu, 132-145.

Lankan government eventually defeated the LTTE through a military campaign in 2009, which ended the 26-year long civil war in the country.

Post-War Sri Lanka

The India's military intervention was strongly criticised as a breach of Sri Lanka's sovereignty, which laid the ground for violence and bloodshed. IPKF's mass atrocities left deep scars on the collective memory of the Tamil population who considered them as their saviors from repression. The mission deployed as a 'Peace Keeping Force' assaulted the whole Tamil population, it once supported, by turning its weapons against them.⁹ One of the most tragic outcomes was the assassination of former Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE. India's military intervention proved as a diplomatic failure which eroded its credibility as a peace broker in the region. It also led to growing anti-government sentiments in the province of Tamil Nadu and a deep distrust between India and Sri Lanka. The conflict caused huge loss of life, with over 100,000 casualties during the civil war.¹⁰ This protracted conflict had a severe impact on Sri Lanka's economy due to the damage to the livelihoods and infrastructure. Sri Lanka shifted focus towards reconstruction efforts particularly in the war-affected areas. It also made some efforts for ethnic reconciliation but faced significant hurdles due to lack of inclusive political solutions for addressing the Tamil grievances.

Current Relations between India and Sri Lanka

In recent years, both India and Sri Lanka have engaged to strengthen bilateral ties through economic, maritime, and strategic cooperation. It includes high-level visits, trade deals, and joint ventures. India has become one of the largest trading partners of Sri Lanka through investments in infrastructure, energy, and tourism. Important projects include the Trincomalee oil tank farm among India, Sri Lanka, and the UAE; and the Sampur Solar Power Plant project.¹¹ During the Sri Lankan economic crises, India also provided huge economic assistance to stabilise Sri Lankan economy. During the recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Sri Lanka in April 2025, Sri Lankan President Dissanayake conferred the 'Mithra Vibhushana Medal to Modi,'

⁹ '35 years on: When Indian 'Peace Keepers' became aggressors in Tamil Eelam,'" *Tamil Guardian*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/35-years-ipkf-withdrew-sri-lanka>.

¹⁰ Aftabuddin Ahammad, "India-Sri Lanka Conflict: An Overview," *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)* 6, no. 7, (2024): 906-912.

¹¹ Rathindra Kuruwita, "India Tightens Grip Over Sri Lanka With Defense Pact," *The Diplomat*, April 09, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/india-tightens-grip-over-sri-lanka-with-defense-pact/>.

which is Sri Lanka's highest honor to foreign leaders.¹² Both nations signed at least seven MoUs related to defense, energy, digital technology, healthcare, and development assistance.¹³ The Indian government has also offered to convert \$100 million of loans into grants for Sri Lanka.¹⁴ Despite Sri Lanka's policy shift towards India, bilateral disputes remain unresolved. For instance, the maritime dispute over the Katchatheevu Island in which Indian fishermen poaching in Sri Lanka's waters, complicates the relationship. Also, the growing engagement send a signal that the NPP-led Sri Lankan government is once again sacrificing its strategic autonomy and moving closer to India, which risks reopening the deep historical wounds inflicted by previous Indian interventions.

Current Relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka

Pakistan and Sri Lanka have historically enjoyed a conflict-free and relatively stable relationship rooted in shared cultural ties and diplomatic cooperation. During the 1971 crisis, when India blocked Pakistan's overflight through the Indian airspace, Sri Lanka granted landing rights to the Pakistani civilian and military airplanes.¹⁵ Sri Lanka had also supported the UN resolution for a nuclear-weapons-free zone in South Asia following India's 1974 nuclear tests.¹⁶ Pakistan also supplied military hardware and training support to the Sri Lankan government to defeat the LTTE in the IPKF's era.¹⁷ Additionally, during Sri Lanka's civil war, the Pakistani Cricket Board supported Sri Lankan cricket by sending its cricket team to the island. Despite the 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, the Lankan Cricket Board continued to send its team to Pakistan post-2017. In 2016, Pakistan signed a defense agreement with Sri Lanka to provide Colombo with eight JF-17 fighter aircraft. Pakistani and Sri Lankan armies and naval forces engage in regular military and naval exercises.¹⁸

However, India's hegemonic designs in South Asia pose serious challenges for Pakistan, as India expands its influence over Sri Lanka. With Prime Minister Modi's

¹² Rathindra Kuruwita, "India Tightens Grip Over Sri Lanka With Defense Pact," *The Diplomat*, April 09, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/india-tightens-grip-over-sri-lanka-with-defense-pact/>.

¹³ Kuruwita.

¹⁴ Kuruwita.

¹⁵ Riaz Khokhar and Asma Khalid, "Reviewing Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations," *South Asian Voices*, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/reviewing-pakistan-sri-lanka-relations/>.

¹⁶ Khokhar and Khalid.

¹⁷ Khokhar and Khalid.

¹⁸ Khokhar and Khalid.

influence on Sri Lanka's current leadership and the visible tilt of Sri Lanka towards India, Pakistan must recalibrate its policies to restore regional balance. Historical patterns show that Pakistan supported Sri Lanka even during the IPKF intervention, which highlights strong bilateral trust. However, recent developments reflect shifting alignments that may isolate Pakistan. To counter this, Pakistan should actively deepen its ties with Sri Lanka across diplomatic, economic, and cultural fronts, ensuring itself as a reliable partner in the region.

Policy Recommendations

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- Renewing defense cooperation is essential through counterterrorism expertise, information intelligence, and maritime security cooperation within the Indian Ocean region which is an area of strategic competition. Joint naval exercises between the two countries would help to diversify the security partnerships for Sri Lanka, reducing reliance on India. Training of army and airforce personnel should be made a regular feature to create goodwill for Pakistan.
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- Soft power and cultural engagement must also be strengthened. Pakistan may increase the scholarships for Sri Lankan students, while initiating Cricket diplomacy by inviting Sri Lankan teams for bilateral series in Pakistan.
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