# Revisiting Interventionism: India's Peacekeeping Force in Sri Lanka

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- Brookings India hosted its first "Back to the Future" series panel discussion, to revisit India's intervention and withdrawal from Sri Lanka on the 30th anniversary of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (1987-1990). The series involves former decision-makers to revisit a historic episode in India's foreign and security relations to draw lessons and improve future policies.
- The expert panel included Lt. Gen. A. S. Kalkat, Army Commander; Commander, Indian Peacekeeping Force, Sri Lanka (1987-90); Mr. Kalyan K. Mitra, Research & Analysis Wing officer at India's High Commission in Sri Lanka (1988-91); Ambassador Lakhan Lal Mehrotra, High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka (1989-90); Ambassador Teresita C. Schaffer, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia (1989-92) and Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, Brookings India, and former National Security Advisor.
- The session was moderated by Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy at Brookings India, and it was open to the public and on-the-record. In attendance were officials from the Ministry of External Affairs and from the Indian Armed Forces, foreign diplomats (including the High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to India), academics from India's leading think tanks, members of the media and civil society.

## Interventionism Redux

Is deployment of military force still a valid option for India to pursue its interests or solve conflicts beyond its borders? Are there other forms of coercive or cooperative involvement that Delhi should invest in to shape developments in its neighbourhood? To answer some of these questions, Amb. Shivshankar Menon shed light on why the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) experience still matters to contemporary scholars and audiences. Menon outlined three key factors that drove India's involvement in Sri Lanka in 1987: the spillover effects of the conflict into India's territory, India's interest in Sri Lankan unity, and avoiding interference from foreign powers. He questioned the efficacy of use of force, and stated that it is *"the combination of force, intervention and political goals you set yourself and how those goals apply to the use of force, which will determine the outcome."*

## Operational and Coordination Challenges

Speakers highlighted the lack of military preparedness on the part of the Indian Armed Forces in Sri Lanka. Lt. Gen. Kalkat recounted the operational challenges he faced during his initial years in Sri Lanka *"The weapons we took were for the desert plans of the Indo-Pak border, not suitable for the jungles of Sri Lanka…the weapons we had were getting entangled in branches. I took a unilateral decision and ordered the barrels to be cut…this was the state of affairs."*

A considerable part of the discussion focused on whether the IPKF was, in fact, a peacekeeping force, or an instance of interventionism by the Indian government. India's main goal, according to Kalkat, was resolving the civil strife in Sri Lanka by placing a military force at the recourse of President J.R. Jayawardene. This was an instance of India coming to the aid of one of its neighbours.

Amb. Mehrotra, however, spoke of differences in opinion towards the IPKF within the Sri Lankan government. President Jayawardene invited IPKF assistance, and referred to it primarily as a peacekeeping force, while then Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa was of the view that direct negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) would be simplified without the IPKF.

## Outside Perspectives

Beyond the immediate region, Amb. Teresita Schaffer described America's role at the time as "*we are observers, not doers.*" Despite repeated requests for American military assistance by Sri Lanka, the United States decided the conflict was best left without the intervention of powers outside the sub-continent. Schaffer stated that although the airdrop of food supplies to Jaffna by the Indian Air Force was criticised at the time by the United States, they had supported the overall Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and IPKF's involvement. Schaffer noted that the U.S.-Sri Lankan relationship was mired in the cold war politics of the time, and concerns about China were on the rise.

Participants noted that there is a lack of dialogue between India and the United States on third countries, which is important considering that the two share similar perspectives, but employ different priorities and capabilities. The speakers noted that the U.S - Sri Lankan relationship had evolved over time, with the United States taking an active interest in a military relationship with Sri Lanka, coupled with maritime cooperation in the larger Indo-Pacific region. Panelists pointed to larger questions surrounding what role the United States would play in the world, and Asia in particular in the future.

## Lessons Learned

The discussion saw key points being raised around the lessons learnt from the IPKF intervention. First, military planners must start with strategic guidance from political leaderships, on where and when the intervention must end. General Kalkat concluded that "*The test of policy in war or conflict is how it ends, government must avoid being distracted by questions of getting bogged down.*" Secondly, in Sri Lanka, Indian armed forces were not prepared and should not have been expected to set up civil infrastructure such as courts, hospitals, schools. Finally, clarity on the goal of conflict resolution and armed intervention was imperative from the start of the mission, coupled with a streamlining of policies. The discussion highlighted that while there was some clarity in the goals of the IPKF, officials on the ground pursued different and, at times, clashing policies to achieve a common goal. Besides lack of civil-military coordination, the various branches of military, domestic, and external intelligence often also operated in isolation. Investing internally in coordination and dialogue between these different branches of government will improve India's operational readiness and capability to shape events beyond its borders.


*(From L to R) Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy at Brookings India; Lt. Gen. A. S. Kalkat, former Army Commander; Commander, Indian Peacekeeping Force, Sri Lanka (1987-90); Amb. Teresita C. Schaffer, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia (1989-92); Amb. Lakhan Lal Mehrotra, Former High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka (1989-90); Mr. Kalyan K. Mitra, former Research & Analysis Wing officer at India's High Commission in Sri Lanka (1988-91).*

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