

Rumblings in the UN: Domestic press coverage of US and Sri Lankan narratives of peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Abstract

News media plays a crucial role in generating public discourse and interpreting 'reality', and within this context the role played by newspapers in interpreting and explaining complex political machinations cannot be overlooked. The process of packaging 'reality' for media consumption, invariably results in the framing of narratives that emphasise certain attributes of a media event over others. This paper analyses how US and Sri Lankan newspapers covered a number of complex political narratives, when reporting a US sponsored resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council on alleged war crimes committed during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. This paper looks at how the domestic press in the two countries favoured nationalist frames, emphasising the 'home government' in the best possible light.

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Introduction:

The role of mass media in constructing social reality has a significant academic pedigree, and as the fourth estate the news media is tasked with presenting readers with a 'real' account of what lies beyond the immediate experience or an individual's perception and experience – a mediated reality (McNair, 2005, p30). It is also frequently argued that this reality comes with caveats and interpretations, frames and agendas. Cohen's famous argument that "the press may not be successful in telling us what to think but is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about," where scholars argue the process of constructing linear narratives out of complex stories with twists, turns and numerous competing arguments, result not only in setting news agendas, but also in assigning attributes to key news makers (Wanta et al, 2004) and framing events.

Within this theoretical scaffolding, this paper analyses how domestic media in the US and Sri Lanka employed nationalist frames when contextualising a geopolitical narrative of accountability in a US led resolution tabled at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March 2012, on alleged war crimes committed in the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war three years earlier.

In May 2009 the Sri Lankan military was successful in defeating, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – an internationally designated terrorist group fighting for Eelam, a separate state in North and Eastern Sri Lanka. However post-conflict Sri Lanka has been plagued by allegations of war crimes committed by both the Tigers and the military during the final days of the conflict, and the events central to this study represent a single event in a process of seeking accountability for the alleged crimes,

This study looks at a number of US and government owned mainstream publications in Sri Lanka, to elicit domestic news frames employed by the respective publications and to determine the presence of nationalist frame clusters deployed when covering the resolution, its impact and the motivation of the key news actors.

Sri Lanka's civil war and the alleged war crimes aftermath: A brief history

After months of bitter conflict the Sri Lankan government claimed victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. The battle ended a three decade long civil war which had escalated from low intensity terrorist conflict to fully fledged battlefield combat. Before their fall the Tamil Tigers, an internationally designated terrorist organisation that had fought for a separate state, had successfully operated a quasi state of Eelam in the country's North and East.

But the government victory was soon shadowed by claims of what international observers called a civilian 'bloodbath', with initial United Nations reports claiming about 7000 civilians may have been killed in three months of fighting. More than 300,000 civilians in the crossfire were forced to trek to 'safety' across one of the deadliest battlefronts in South Asia.

In past three years, significant prima facie evidence has surfaced suggesting both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government may have committed war crimes during the final days of the war. The Tigers were accused of using civilians as human shields in government designated 'safe zones', while government forces were accused of shelling the safe zones violating their own ceasefire. The government was also accused of the extrajudicial killing of surrendered Tiger leaders; and operating internment camps for Tamil civilians in the aftermath of the war while refusing independent external monitoring and at times access to international aid groups, while allowing the military to selectively 'arrest' alleged Tiger cadre from the camps for interrogation. The Sri Lankan government was also accused of censorship and the intimidation of journalists, preventing independent arbitration and accountability. However with the Tiger hierarchy decimated, the Sri Lankan government was the only stakeholder faced with the task of answering to the international community for these alleged crimes.

The government of President Rajapakse, with his former military colonel brother at his side as the Secretary of Defence, had found the right military strategy of isolating the Tigers from their traditional escape routes and trapping the leadership on the eastern coast. But the success also resulted from a series of international developments including waning sympathy for

the Tigers and the entry of new players like China into the Sri Lankan theatre¹.

The politics that sustained the war, also shielded the government against international backlash, with China protecting Sri Lanka from international retribution, initially thwarting a resolution to investigate Sri Lankan war crimes tabled at the May 2009 UN Human Rights Council, and instead passing a resolution condemning the Tigers and commending government forces.

Despite initial success in securing much needed ground in international diplomatic circles, Sri Lanka was eventually forced on the defensive through a series of high profile recommendations seeking independent investigations into alleged war crimes. Among these; calls for an independent, international investigation by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and a US State Department report to Congress in October 2009; the January 2010 Permanent Peoples' Tribunal; the International Crisis group report in May 2010; and the June 2010 report by the Secretary-General's panel of experts on accountability in Sri Lanka. The media assault on Sri Lanka was also relentless, including initial news reports printed in the *New York Times* publishing satellite images showing military forces shelling in civilian safe zones; the British Channel 4 broadcast of mobile phone footage showing the alleged summary execution of Tiger cadre by Sri Lankan soldiers; and Jon Snow's documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* in June 2011, also broadcast

¹ In the post-September 11 global environment, the LTTE lost numerous political havens in the West and was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the US, Canada, Australian and Europe. India, despite its southern Tamil state of Tamil Nadu had ceased to be viable escape route for retreating Tigers. The Indian Central Government – a vicarious benefactor which traditionally resisted the military eradication of the LTTE – turned its back on the Tigers and their leader Praphakaran who was wanted for Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. By 2008, a precarious Norwegian facilitated ceasefire, held together by the lure of foreign aid and facilitated through the June 2003 Tokyo donor conference co-chaired by the US, Norway, Japan and the EU, ceased to become effective. By this stage, China had become Sri Lanka's highest donor, bankrolling the war in exchange for a sea port in south Sri Lanka as part of a string of possible naval bases along China's crude oil supply route from the Arabian Gulf through the Indian Ocean.

on Channel 4 and retransmitted in many Western countries including Australia.

Within the context of this study it is important to outline the role played by key United Nations agencies during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war, and in responding to allegations of war crimes in the aftermath of the conflict.

The UN response to Sri Lankan war crime allegations

Before discussing the specific nature of the proposed UNHRC resolution it is important to understand the role played by the United Nations and its subsidiary organisations in the final stages of the war and its immediate aftermath.

The UN response to the worsening conflict in Sri Lanka from the latter half of 2008 was less than stellar. Having pulled its staff out of Northern Sri Lanka under government orders in September 2008, the UN remained unperturbed by the conflict in Northern Sri Lanka, with the Security Council issuing its only press statement on Sri Lanka eight months later on May 13. “...(M)embers of the Security Council express grave concern over the worsening humanitarian crisis in north-east Sri Lanka, in particular the reports of hundreds of civilian casualties in recent days, and call for urgent action by all parties to ensure the safety of civilians,” the statement read, but no action, urgent or otherwise would come from the Security Council².

In the immediate aftermath of the war’s end in May 2009, 17 member nations of the United Nations Human Rights Council convened a special session to discuss human rights concerns in post war Sri Lanka. A resolution tabled by the group deploring abuse by both the government and LTTE, and urging the government to co-operate with humanitarian organisations, provide protection to civilians and displaced persons, “respect media freedom and investigate attacks against journalists and human rights defenders,” (Human Rights Watch, 2009), failed to secure support. Instead

² In contrast the Security Council, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, was somewhat active, issuing a number of statements including one on September 9, 2008, expressing concern over increased hostilities in Sri Lanka. United Nations meeting coverage and Press release <http://www.un.org/en/unpress/>.

the council adopted resolution A/HRC/S-11/L.1/Rev.2 commending the Sri Lankan government for concluding the war – the resolution was supported by 26 member nations including China and India.

In October 2009 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called for an independent, international investigation on alleged war crimes, and in June 2010 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a three-member panel of experts to advise him on whether war crimes were committed in the final stages of the civil war. The panel chaired by Indonesian lawyer and politician Marzuki Darusman concluded ‘credible allegations’ that war crimes may have been committed by both parties. The *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka*, was submitted to the Secretary-General on April 12, 2011, and was made public on April 25. The panel also recommended the Human Rights Council reconsider resolution A/HRC/S-11/L.1/Rev.2

In December 2011, the Sri Lankan government published a report on its own investigation into the failure of the 2002 peace process which led to the escalation of violence between Government forces and the Tamil Tigers. The report published by a government appointed *Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)* was heavily criticised by human rights groups with International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International refusing to legitimise the investigation by appearing before the Commission (BBC, 2010).

The LLRC was unsuccessful in stemming the flow of international criticism of the government’s handling of post-war reconciliation. On March 22, 2012, the Sri Lankan government faced yet another challenge, when the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted seven resolutions on post-conflict Sri Lanka. Among these was the controversial resolution A/HRC/19/L.2/Rev1 - *Action on Resolution on Promoting Reconciliation and Accountability in Sri Lanka*. Sri Lankans viewed this resolution as a potential floodgate for future international investigations and campaigned vigorously against its adoption noting that Sri Lanka’s own reconciliation mechanisms were adequate and arguing international intervention was not needed.

The US-led resolution, co-sponsored by Australia, Canada and 40 other countries, and India’s support of the US push – marking a significant back flip by one of Sri Lanka’s key allies from the 2009 pro-Sri Lankan UN resolution – generated media interest in the West. The government and local Sri Lankan media responded to the US-led resolution with a barrage of

criticism, alleging unwarranted Western intervention and ulterior motives, which begs the question as to how domestic media in the two countries, the US and Sri Lanka framed the media dialogue.

The theoretical underpinning: Agenda-setting, priming, and framing.

The importance of the media is based on the notion of cognitive media effects – the argument that media coverage influences the public’s opinion formation. Theories of cognitive media effects are largely explained through three interrelated concepts agenda-setting, priming, and framing.

Gamson and Modigliani present media coverage and its impact on public opinion and attitude as a system in dynamic equilibrium where one informs and influences the other. They argue “(w)e do not... argue that changes in media discourse cause changes in public opinion. Each system interacts with the other: media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse (1989, p2).

There are two fundamental schools of thought with respect to theories of cognitive media effect – one school of thought views agenda settings as the overarching theoretical frame work to which framing and priming are subservient (McCombs et al, 1997); and another school of thought views agenda setting and framing to be two interrelated yet divergent theoretical frameworks focusing of two different perspectives of human cognition and understanding. Theoretical work on the primacy of agenda setting posits, that greater the frequency of media coverage of particular issue the more likely the issue would be recalled by the media consumer – thus arguing the media is able to influence what people think about by selecting some media agendas and not others. Agenda setting in turn leads to priming of an issue, where issues are made salient through agenda setting. Within this context the notion of framing is presented as second level agenda setting – where first level agenda setting make an issue salient and highlights certain aspects of that issue over others through the selection of news frames (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; McCombs, 1997; Zaller, 1992). In his seminal work on frames Entman notes that frames are different from agendas, suggesting salience in frames is not achieved through mere repetition but through the incorporation of selected frames into the media narrative.

Entman (1993) argues that framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*, presenting the concept of framing as an active process. Entman argues “(t)o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to” *define problems, diagnose causes* that create the problem, make *moral judgements* by evaluating the causal agents, and *offer remedies* to the problem (Entman, 1993, p52). Gitlin notes that media frames are, “largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize [sic] the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports” (1980, p7). According to frame theory, news frames therefore play a crucial role in both the construction of media frames by news makers, and the subsequent unpacking and interpreting of news frames by audiences through the application of individual frames (de Vreese, 2005; D’Angelo and Kuypers, 2010).

While any attempt at reaching a resolution on this controversy is beyond the scope of this study, this paper focuses on the notion of frames either as second level agenda-setting or primary analytical tools in their own right – a position that does not deter the value of frames as a useful tool in understanding possible cognitive effects of news media in influence opinion formation in the public.

McQuail (2010) presents a four part evolution of studies on media effect – the initial and untested belief in the persuasive power of the media; the research-led dissolution over predictable causality of media effect where research while conceding some media effects suggested the importance of existing attitudes in the individual perception of media; the search for cognitive effects as opposed to attitude change; and finally resting on the notion of a ‘social constructivism’ where media effect is negotiated between media framing and individual reading (pp455-461). The social constructivism perspective of the media suggests framing in both the presenting and the comprehending of news – presented as media frames and individual frames (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987; Scheufele 1999), the construction of media frames by news makers and the subsequent unpacking of news frames by the audiences through the application of individual frames – frame-building and frame-setting (de Vreese, 2005; D’Angelo and Kuypers, 2010).

In his comparison of US press coverage US and Russian officials shooting down two passenger aircrafts identified as possible hostile targets³, Entman (1991) argues the nature of nationalistic bias in international news frames – the emphasis and de-emphasis of key attributes in constructing salience. He further notes the need for such comparison claiming, “comparing media narratives of events that could have been reported similarly helps to reveal the critical textual choices that framed the story but would otherwise remain submerged in undifferentiated texts (p6).

Methodology:

A ProQuest newsstand search was conducted for the search words “Sri Lanka*” and “war crimes” or “UN resolution” from February 01- March 31, 2012. A small corpus of relevant news articles were identified in a selection of US newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The Wall Street Journal Asia*.

While the small corpus of articles limited the quantitative value of the study, it provides an ideal framework for a qualitative study of the coverage in greater detail. As de Ruyter and Scholl note “(q)ualitative research does not measure, it provides insight,” (1998) thus arguing the validity of research despite small sample sizes. Early work on qualitative content analysis also suggests the validity of small samples in gathering rich data. Kracauer notes research “performed on a small sample, invite attention to unique traits which are perhaps manifest in only one single configuration of statements. The insight into wholes which these unique patterns provide gives rise to observations and hypotheses of unusually rich relevance,” (1952-1953, pp631-642).

A similar analysis of Sri Lankan news media reports were analysed through site specific Google searches of Sri Lankan newspaper websites of the government owned *Daily News*, and the *Sunday Observer* and the independent *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Times*. Web content published between January 22 and March 31 was subjected to textual analysis for a number of key words including Clinton, Blake and UNHRC. Due to the large volume of newspaper articles, and the complexity and the diversity of the

³ In July 1988, US Navy ship Vincennes, shot down an Iranian passenger aircraft killing 290 passengers and crew; and in September 1983 a Soviet fighter shot down a Korean passenger aircraft killing 269 passengers and crew.

nuanced frame structure, a detailed analysis was conducted only on press reports published in the Government owned *Daily News*, and the *Sunday Observer* – two newspapers with the widest circulation in the country, while the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Times* coverage was used as an independent point of reference.

The frame analysis, in this context, does not attempt to discuss grand-narrative frames, and instead focuses on exploring more subtle media frames present in the news coverage to compare and contrast between the reportage.

US press coverage:

US newspapers, as expected, favoured coverage of the US role in the resolution, and framed it as a conflict between a quest for accountability and justice, and an attempt at evasion and subterfuge.

The New York Times journalist Nick Cumming-Bruce, wrote on March 20;

“An American-led initiative calling on Sri Lanka to account for the carnage that ended its civil war three years ago has become the focus of a diplomatic dispute in Geneva and anger in Sri Lanka.”

The article headlined ‘Move at U.N. on carnage in Sri Lanka sets off fury’ led with a *conflict frame* then moved in to a *justice frame*. The introduction was framed with the notion of culpability and the need for accountability and justice, containing the loaded phrase “account for the carnage that ended its civil war”.

In this context the primary news frame is one of conflict between numerous stakeholders. The *reconciliation* frame, a natural couplet of the conflict frame is presented only in a cursory manner when discussing the nature of the US resolution through American news voices. The report quotes Washington’s Ambassador to the Human Rights Council, Eileen Donahoe, describing the resolution as “exceedingly cooperative and collaborative in spirit”.

The primary conflict frame is further unpacked through two sub-ordinate frames – Sri Lanka’s *culpability and evasion of justice*, and the US-led argument on the *need for accountability and justice*. Then the argument is simply a diplomatic tussle between those wanting to hold Sri Lanka accountable and those supporting Sri Lanka’s subterfuge.

The overarching conflict frame clearly divides the text into two sections. The first section deals with Sri Lanka's apparent culpability, implying the need for accountability and justice, and outlining the reasonable nature of the international request. The second half of the text starts with the sentence "Yet Sri Lanka is mobilizing to fight it off", and then presents the Sri Lankan government's resistance, its underhanded tactics of intimidation, and a concerted diplomatic campaign to pervert the course of accountability and justice.

The US's motivation for sponsoring the resolution is presented as altruistic, where the only dividend anticipated by the US through their involvement is simply explained as long term peace dividends in Sri Lanka. The news reports offer no alternative diplomatic dividend for US such as its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. The US action is explained on the basis of UN reports which suggest the Sri Lankan government's so called 'humanitarian rescue operation', which ended the civil war "had caused the deaths of as many as 40,000 civilians". The question as to why the US did not intervene in the final days of the war to prevent the alleged carnage is left unanswered.

The absence of any suggestion of an ulterior or even secondary motivation of the part of the US is stark. The report refrains from referencing Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean and its close ties with Sri Lanka, including the fact China bankrolled the final stages of the war in exchange for a Chinese-financed harbour development on the southern tip of the country – a harbour, which foreign affairs analysts claim could be a future naval base for a Chinese fleet in line with that nation's strategic need to secure sea routes through the Indian Ocean.

New York commentator Gibson Bateman (June 2012), openly pondered on the Sri Lankan citizen journalism site *ground views* "what was driving US diplomatic efforts in Geneva?" The essence of Bateman's article is a discrepancy in US foreign policy, where the US State Department announced, on the same day of the resolution that it would relax restrictions on the sale of surveillance equipment to the Sri Lankan government.

The motivation for Sri Lanka's action is presented in the US press, perhaps not inaccurately, as one of self-preservation, and is framed as political *subterfuge* and an attempt to *evade justice*. It notes President Rajapakse had personally contacted his counterparts in Asia, Africa and Latin America – alluding to an international conflict frame which pits the 'developed' nations of North America, Europe and Australia against the predominantly developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The President's action is presented within the frame of wider polarisation in international diplomatic

circles, but no specific reference is made to en-block voting of Western nations despite such references being inferred in respect to Sri Lanka's support base.

While the Sri Lankan government's argument of needing more time to properly execute its own reconciliation program without external intervention is given news voice, it is immediately countered with commentary from unspecified Human Rights groups which claim there is an aggressive government campaign to brand the resolution as "Western meddling" and its supporters as Tiger sympathisers. The report further claims Sri Lankans are employing similar intimidation "tactics" at the Geneva Human Rights Council, against Sri Lankan non-governmental organisations that support the US resolution.

A lengthier piece by Cumming-Bruce published in *New York Times'* stablemate, the Paris-based *International Herald Tribune*, mirrors large sections of the *Times'* report, but provides wider international references and markers consistent with the paper's global focus.

The *International Herald Tribune* report of March 20, headlined 'Sri Lanka scrambles to thwart U.N. inquiry into civil war', led with;

"A U.S.-led resolution before the U.N. Human Rights Council calling for an investigation of the end of Sri Lanka's civil war has met with protest in that country.

Even as it faces new demands to act to protect civilians in Syria, the U.N. human rights body will vote this week on a U.S.-led initiative calling on Sri Lanka to account for the carnage that ended its civil war three years ago, a move that has become the focus of a tense diplomatic tussle in Geneva and angry protest in Sri Lanka."

The primary framing of the *International Herald Tribune* article employs a global meta-narrative to explain the latest developments on the Sri Lankan front, connecting it with a somewhat euphoric presentation of the UN's efforts to "protect civilians in Syria". The question of why the international human rights body and the US maintained strategic silence during the so called "carnage" in Sri Lanka, with the UN withdrawing its agencies from the war torn north, is once again left largely unanswered, simply linking the development in the Sri Lankan theatre to a general intolerance of "abusive regimes and the impunity of their rulers" in the wake of the Arab Spring. Ambassador Donahoe is quoted saying the rationale of the US led resolution "is resonating across most regions," with the exception of Asia, where the

region's two dominant players Indian and Pakistan are voting for and against the US respectively.

The mirroring of articles in *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, coupled with the fact each was published after the March 23 vote, frame the outcome as an initial success for international justice. Both reports written by Cumming-Bruce, underscore the US administration's purported hardline approach to human rights abuse. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is quoted saying the international community had "sent a strong signal that Sri Lanka will only achieve lasting peace through real reconciliation and accountability". *The New York Times* report also quotes Ambassador Eileen Donahoe after the vote as saying: "Our view is that if there isn't some form of truth and accounting of these kind of mass-scale atrocities and casualties, you can't have lasting peace."

In contrast comments made by Sri Lankan delegates remain disingenuous, with Sri Lanka's Special Envoy on Human Rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe, condemning the resolution as "misconceived, unwarranted and ill-timed" before walking out ignoring journalists' questions; and Chief Legal Adviser to Sri Lanka's Cabinet and former Attorney General, Mohan Peiris, claiming "It won't change anything; we will just forge ahead as planned". The report also claims Peiris dismissed Belgian Ambassador Francois Roux's concerns about Sri Lankan government intimidation tactics in Sri Lanka and Geneva, as "absolute rubbish".

In the aftermath of the vote, the justice frame is presented through two opposing responses – a US-led genuine attempt at lasting peace in Sri Lanka meeting with a disingenuous response from a petulant government in Colombo.

Both the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune* reports of March 20 largely focus on the US and Sri Lankan government perspectives and pay little attention to other key players in the region. The resolution is tied to international event such as the Arab Spring and is explained in terms of broad stroke international policy shifts, with no explanation of the strategic policy dividends of the individual actors such as Pakistan and India.

The coverage fails to provide possible regional explanations for the behaviour of key local players. There is no reference to Pakistan's attempts to distance Islamabad's decision making process from that of Washington, in an attempt to reassert its territorial sovereignty in the turbulent politics following the US assassination of Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani soil, and its desire not to scrutinise alleged war crimes in the region in light of its own

armed conflict in Baluchistan. Similarly the Indian position is not limited to its domestic political reality, namely its reliance on Tamil Nadu, but also reflects the need to counter increasing Chinese incursion into India's sphere of influence and China's close relationship with Sri Lanka which forces India to flex its muscle in the region. India's stance can also be explained as an attempt to trade on the social capital of India's position as the world's largest democracy as counterweight to Chinese financial might.

In contrast Tom Wright's report in the March 20 *Wall Street Journal* focuses predominantly on India's support, highlighting the US's success at gaining a key ally in India. The paper led with led with;

"U.S. officials said they gained a key ally in their effort to push Sri Lanka to allow an independent investigation of government atrocities carried out at the climax of the country's 26-year civil war against the Tamil Tigers in 2009."

India's role in the resolution and the condition of its support – which saw the resolution softened in favour of Sri Lanka – are downplayed or ignored outright by the US press. The remainder of the report is framed largely in line with the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*, extensively quoting US Ambassador to the UN Eileen Donahoe who highlighted the US's judicial and human rights dividends, and Washington's conciliatory tones which ruled out punitive actions against Sri Lanka such as travel bans and economic sanctions. A spokesman for the Sri Lankan President is briefly quoted arguing, rather unconvincingly, for more time to implement its own reconciliation program which the newspaper article claims "largely exonerated government forces".

The US press coverage of India's abandonment of Sri Lanka was also presented through a frame of isolation. The *Wall Street Journal* evoked the frame of isolation, claiming "Sri Lanka is looking increasingly isolated..." — the paper however did not note the support of other key players in the region including China – the Rajapakse regime's strongest ally in the east, and Bangladesh and Maldives which are the only other members of the South Asian Association for Regional Corporation with a vote in the UN Human Rights Council.

However an opinion piece published in *The Wall Street Journal Asia* (Hong Kong) on March 28, 2012 by American Enterprise Institute in Washington fellow Sadanand Dhume – not included in the study of news reports – argued the strategic brilliance of the Indian move in championing democracy. "China's best friends in the region include Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa regime and

the Pakistani army. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, radical Islamists – often backed by like-minded military officers – threaten their own societies and regional stability,” Dhume wrote, noting India’s need to foster democracy in the region for its own political survival. “If India’s democratic workings lead it to support democracy and human rights abroad, it will win the support of other societies that value fair elections and individual rights. These countries are much more likely to admire India’s achievements and empathize [sic] with its challenges than those with an authoritarian bent,” he wrote.

Sri Lankan press coverage:

Compared to the number of news reported generated in the US, the volume of Sri Lankan news coverage, as expected, was huge. However a reading of the text from mid-January to the end of March suggests the frames of reference were formulated within the first few weeks of the period, following news that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had sent a concerned communiqué to the Sri Lankan government.

On February 5, *The Sunday Times* political column published a report headlined ‘Govt. on [sic] firefighting mode to face Geneva volcano’. The report said that on January 27 Acting US Ambassador Valerie S. Fowler had hand-delivered a letter from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to External Affairs Minister GL Peiris. The column claimed the Secretary of State, while acknowledging ‘a number of important and positive recommendations’ made in the LLRC, also said the US was concerned that Sri Lanka had not presented a comprehensive action plan for reconciliation, and as such had decided to sponsor a resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council seeking a more concrete commitment from the Sri Lankan government. On the same day the newspaper also published a news report headlined ‘US sends three envoys to assess Govt. initiatives on LLRC report.’ It noted the arrival of US Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, Marie Otero and Assistant Secretary in the State Department for Central and South Asian Affairs, Robert Blake on February 12⁴. The same article also wrote that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had invited Sri

⁴ The article also wrote “Steven Rapp, whose new designation is Ambassador at large for Global Criminal Justice. He will arrive in Sri Lanka tomorrow and leave on February 11. He is expected to meet several government officials including Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa.”

Lankan External Affairs Minister GL Peiris to visit her in Washington to further discuss US concerns ahead of the Human Rights Council.

A site specific search for the word ‘Clinton’ within the four newspaper sites of the government owned *Daily News* and *Sunday Observer* and the independent *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Times*, showed the government owned *Daily News*, and *Sunday Observer* were silent for nearly a week. The *Sunday Observer* commenced its coverage on February 12 with a report headlined ‘accountability must start with LTTE for killing their own cadres’. “The world needs to be reminded again. Sri Lanka was a victim of terrorism. The LTTE was an agent of terror and it was against LTTE terrorism that the Sri Lankan Armed Forces were fighting,” Shenali Waduge wrote in a characteristically editorialised report. The report listed numerous Tiger atrocities, selectively highlighting attacks such as the killing of 33 novice monks in 1987 and the murder of 146 pilgrims in the Buddhist holy city of Anuradhapura⁵. “If the West, the UN and all other “humanitarian” organisations wish to ignore the LTTE’s spate of killings over three decades, so be it. Yet, when pressure is being exerted on a sovereign country completely ignoring punishing the LTTE for its acts of terror, the people of Sri Lanka will not remain silent,” the report continued.

The *Sunday Observer* argument is predicated on two poorly crafted and crudely presented narrative frames – a righteous government and errant LTTE; and credibility of the accuser.

- i. International community ignore the righteousness of the government and it is the LTTE that has violated human rights.

This primary frame of a righteous government and errant LTTE if further unpackaged through two secondary frames – the LTTE are terrorist, and the government has eradicated terrorism, therefore the government has nothing to answer for; and the Tigers have frequently violated human rights, but the West are biased in not investigating them.

⁵ Interestingly the report omitted the attack on the Kandy temple of the tooth, arguably the most popular site of Buddhist pilgrimage. The attack was purportedly orchestrated by the LTTE’s eastern commander Karuna who subsequently defected to the government side after being owed by the country’s two major political parties, and now holds a ministerial position in the government.

The terrorist activities of the LTTE are well documented and despite the news reports claim “(t)hat the West and other humanitarian authorities are biased goes without saying. They did pittance for all of the heinous crimes committed by the LTTE,” is inaccurate. The LTTE was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the US, UK, EU, Australia and Canada. The UN has investigated the Tigers on many occasions especially by United Nations Special Rapporteur for Children and Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu. The frame deliberately creates a false narrative, that the international community “never questioned the LTTE” thus preparing the ground for a seemingly valid yet factually inaccurate question of why they now question a “sovereign government (that) has eliminated terrorism.”

Despite asking “why is the *world* not punishing the LTTE for its crimes?” the article makes no reference as to why the Sri Lankan government itself failed to charge the only surviving high ranking Tiger leader Kumaran Pathmanathan who was in government custody, or the LTTE’s once-feared Eastern commander Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan Colonel Karuna who was accused of numerous war crimes – including the recruitment of child soldiers –who is now a minister in the Rajapakse government. On October 17, 2012 the Colombo government announced Pathmanathan, the international wing leader responsible for Tiger fundraising and weapons procurement was free from prosecution.

- ii. The credibility of the accuser: in this case the crude implication that Clinton and Obama are in the pay of the pro-LTTE lobby.

In her framing of the credibility of the accuser, Waduge attempts to discredit Clinton and President Obama claiming “Hillary Clinton was 'bribed' but she had the presence of mind to return the money. Now Obama is also be 'bribed' and we are yet to hear of his returning the alleged contributions from Tamils for Obama.” The comments relate to an isolated new report in anti-Tiger Asian Tribune which claim Clinton’s 2008 presidential campaign received but rejected donations from an individual allegedly linked with the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation – a designated front organisation of the LTTE. Similarly “Tamils for Obama” openly collected funds for the President’s campaign, but the group have no recorded links with the LTTE.

The Daily News published a similarly editorialised report on February 16, where Government Information Director Wasantha Priya Ramanayake asked “Why did Hillary Clinton send such a letter to us?” The report provides three key narrative frames, much more sophisticated than the crude allegations and

erroneous suppositions of the *Sunday Observer*. The frames would become central to the government narrative in the lead-up to the UNHRC vote.

- i. External intervention into domestic politics: The US intervention is an unwarranted “serious intervention” into the internal affairs of an independent state. The action is similar to an established pattern such as in the case of US incursion into Pakistan to kill Bin Laden and the invasion of Iraq.
- ii. Credibility of the accuser: the argument was presented as an employment of two measures of human rights, where larger countries such as the US act with impunity while imposing loftier ‘human rights’ guidelines on smaller nations.
- iii. Pro-Tiger propaganda: International community is spurred to action by a pro-Tiger Tamil diaspora in the west that has become even more powerful in the wake of the LTTE’s defeat in Sri Lanka.

The first two frames in particular present an interesting argument that is at the heart of asymmetrical international power. While the integrity of the accuser is not vital for the justification of an accusation, the argument opens up a much more sophisticated argument over the asymmetric nature of international power where the actions of powerful countries, especially within the context of human rights in the fight against terrorism, can be brought into question.

The government media’s delayed response to Hillary Clinton coincided with Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake’s visit to Sri Lanka. Rasika Somarathna’s coverage of Blake’s press conference in the February 14 *Daily News*, focused primarily on Blake’s companion US Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Maria Otero. Blake was given no direct voice but was paraphrased saying the ‘US hopes to work cooperatively with the government.’ While the paper did not report Blake’s clarification of an impending US-led resolution, it published a number of responses from government ministers and pro-government politicians. In a country where it is customary for Ministers to make political comments well outside their portfolios, the *Daily News* gave news voice to Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities Minister Wimal Weerawansa; Chief Government Whip and Water Supply and Drainage Minister Dinesh Gunawardana; Public Relations and Public Affairs Minister Mervyn Silva; Prime Minister D M Jayaratne; and Omalpe Sobhitha Thera the leader of the monk-led ultra nationalist party Jathika Hela Urumaya, in series of reports published between February 14-16.

Five key narrative frames emerged through the political comments, which continued to dominate the discussion on the UNHRC resolution. While some arguments were not mutually exclusive to one frame, the underlying frames in the *Daily News* and *Sunday Observer* political narrative could be presented through the following five frames.

i. Domestic politics and international intervention:

Secondary frames in this narrative included;

- intervention as unnecessary as the country is free from terrorism and already on the path to peace and reconciliation;
- that ‘patriotic’ people will fight against international intervention;
- that intervention was conspiratorial, and born of malice;
- that intervention was uninformed and influenced by pro-Tiger propaganda;
- Western intervention as historic (an attempt to draw parallels between the resolution and Western colonisation).

The notion of external intervention is frequently coupled with the loaded notion of Western intervention, harking back to colonialism – a frequent sub-textual reference that was periodically deployed in overt text as in the case of Public Relations and Public Affairs Minister Mervyn Silva as reported in the February 16 *Daily News*. In this article the Minister notes that people are honour bound to protect the President against foreign intervention, saying; “The bounden duty of all patriotic people in Sri Lanka was to follow in the footsteps of past heroes, such as, Veera Keppetipola, Puran Appu and Gongalegoda Banda and protect the President who liberated and united the country” Silva’s list “past heroes” are drawn from a handful of people who rebelled against British colonial occupation.

ii. A righteous government and errant LTTE:.

Secondary frames in this narrative included;

- the Tigers are terrorists (this argument is frequently left open, perhaps implying human rights violations may legitimately be overlooked within such context);
- the government and its forces launched a ‘humanitarian operation’; and Tigers retaliated with ‘human shield’;
- government forces showed restraint in the face of Tiger provocation – here the restraint is presented as praiseworthy as opposed to expected behaviour in combat.

iii. Credibility of the accuser:

Secondary frames in this narrative included;

- allegations are born out of envy due to US inability to eradicate terrorism;
- the accuser (the West) has no credibility due to their questionable human rights record (in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq);

iv. Unity and separation:

Secondary frames in this narrative included;

- the government has delivered peace and unity, by defeating Tiger separatists;
- the resolution is divisive as it questions the president and the government;
- such division is congruous with terrorist ideals and tantamount to nurturing terrorism;

v. Patriotism and treachery:

Secondary frames in this narrative included;

- traditional call to arms frames presenting the resolution as foreign force, and calling patriots to take up the fight;
- evoking historic anti-colonial patriotism;
- opposition of government or the LLRC report as collusion with the enemy – an idea initially

directed almost exclusively at Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe

The Sunday Observer launched a targeted campaign against domestic opposition to the government, and took particular aim at Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. The report by the newspaper's political correspondent On February 19, led with "Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe is better known for his opportunist politics, betraying his Motherland and even party supporters." The segmented report presented statements from four government Ministers, a deputy Minister, two nationalist monks, a pro-government lawyer, a provincial-council minister and even a Municipal council deputy mayor from a small regional town, but presented no balance or news voice from the Opposition Leader or the opposition.

Three frames emerged in the narrative, which portrayed the Opposition Leader as an outsider, opportunist and finally a traitor.

The two monks levelled criticism at the Opposition Leader for delivering his speech in Parliament against the LLRC in English, "...perhaps, he is more fluent in English than his mother tongue" monk Maduluwawe Sobitha said, framing Wickremesinghe as an outsider disconnected from the average Sri Lankan. The outsider frame continued in a number of statements including that of Minister Johnston Fernando who said, "Wickremesinghe does not love his motherland; he is living here with a foreign mentality..... The Opposition Leader cannot be seen in Sri Lanka on Sinhala New Year, Vesak or Poson festival days." Similarly Wickremesinghe was presented as an opportunist, with lawyer Gomin Dayasiri claiming the "...move by the Opposition Leader is based on a political agenda". Deputy Health Minister Lalith Dissanayake meanwhile claimed "attempts are being made by the Opposition Leader to take political mileage from this LLRC report..."

The framing shifted from outsider and opportunist to traitor. Fernando further noted "...he goes to various foreign countries and make various treacherous statements against the country.... The people are well aware of the attempts made by Wickremesinghe to sabotage the military operations launched to defeat terrorism. Therefore, everybody should vehemently criticise this treacherous attempt made by the Opposition Leader to betray the country and tarnish its image." Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage said "...Wickremesinghe attempted to work in favour of the LTTE and always took the side against the country."

A February 28, *Daily New* report headlined "Join hands to defeat conspiracies..." the newspaper reported Mahanayake theras⁶ of four principle sects of the Temple had "called upon the people to shed all petty differences and join hands with the government to defeat all foreign conspiracies aimed at undermining the country's development efforts and the communal and religious unity..." The statement was attributed to Tibbotuwawe Sri Siddharta Sumangala the Mahanayake of the Malwatte Chapter, Udugama Sri Buddhharakkitha the Mahanayake Asgiriya Chapter, Weweldeniye Medalankara the Mahanayake of the Sri Lanka Ramanna Maha Nikaya and Dawuldena Gnanissara the Mahanayake of the Amarapura Maha Nikaya. What seems like political endorsement from chief monks, must be viewed within a broader socio-cultural framework, where identity is intrinsically linked to *rātā*, *dayā* and *samāyā* literally translated as country, ethnicity and religious affiliation – framing synonymous with Sinhala Buddhist identity. In a country where Buddhists view themselves as the true custodians of the doctrine anointed by the Buddha himself, state patronage and religious survival is complex and historic, where the state frequently seeks the blessing of the temple as traditional kingmakers, and the temple depends on state patronage. Within the Buddhist narrative of Lanka being the land anointed by the Buddha, the Sinhala Buddhist is tasked with its protection against non-Buddhist forces – historically Hindu invaders from India and colonial Christian missionaries from the West. Therefore the temple's formal support of the government is also a coded message evoking the Buddhist laity to protect the government that protects the religion – a frame of *Buddhist protectionism*, intrinsically linked with the duality of patriotism and treachery.

Prior to the Mahanayakas' statement the *Buddhist protectionism* frame was used on numerous occasions, of special note being a speech delivered by the Prime Minister D M Jayaratne, and reported in the *Daily News* on February 18, where he notes "The Maha Sangha have been protecting the country, the nation and the religion for over 2,500 years. Today, there is an atmosphere where certain enemy forces are trying to invite foreign powers to enter the country for gaining their narrow and unpatriotic end".

Conclusion:

⁶ Chief monk of a Buddhist sect

The reportage within the small corpus of news reports focussing on the US-sponsored and largely Western-backed war crimes resolution in the UN Human Rights Council, suggests domestic mainstream newspapers in the US continued to frame the issue through nationalist interests, framing their country's rationale for intervention in a positive light, while overlooking, ignoring or merely omitting less admirable self-serving nationalist interests.

The US press focussed on the altruistic nature of the American move without the slightest hint of strategic needs in the Indian Ocean, despite a wider discourse in the international relations forums on the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean with China's sphere of influence steadily growing in the region. The narratives largely ignored how the US may have an interest in Sri Lanka, particularly in light of the purported 'string of pearls' naval strategy that may see an increased Chinese naval presence in Sri Lanka – a mid-point of the Indian Ocean shipping lane. The omission is particularly stark when viewed alongside the US State Department criticism of China's veto politics in the UN Security Council with respect to numerous resolutions regarding the Middle East, and China's use of similar tactics to protect Sri Lanka from backlash within the international community.

Of equal interest is the dearth of analysis on the Sri Lankan position, outside of government spin. The US newspapers provided little by way of real analysis on the impact of the resolution in Sri Lanka, with the exception of politically charged comments made by the government.

The government owned Sri Lankan newspapers present emotionally charged coverage of the issue, while the *Daily News* and the *Sunday Observer* could easily be dismissed as government 'propaganda' they are significant in the study of cognitive media effects due to their mass penetration as newspapers with the widest circulation. Within this context the two newspapers generated an atmosphere where any criticism of the government's LLRC report would be branded unpatriotic and the criticiser branded a traitor, or a fifth columnist undermining the country from within. Democratic dialogue that even hinted at the failings of the LLRC report were silenced through the repeated framing of such doubts as unpatriotic or treacherous. The equally potent frame of unity and separatism also pushed such discussions out of the democratic arena to an arena of conflict where the curbing of democratic rights were tolerated under the guise of national security. In a country where the code word 'separatist' has been synonymous with terrorism due to the LTTE's quest for separatist state, the repeated use of the separatist frame legitimised the undemocratic silencing of dissent.

Thus newspaper coverage curbed democratic dialogue, and the curbing of such dialogue was presented as a quasi-war time strategy of barricading against an enemy, in this case the US and West. The newspapers also bolstered this narrative with two historic frames, the evoking of anti-colonial sentiments and the stoking of Buddhist nationalism and framing the urging the temple to protect the government.

In this context the newspapers took the obligatory nationalism in such coverage to a new height, where nationalist unity was not only expected but demanded for the purported greater good. The strategy was somewhat extraordinary, considering the government's argument against international intervention was, on part, based on the eradication of terrorism and the return of democracy.

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