
Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy: The Way to Go

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Foreign policy derives from a country's efforts to best represent its national interests in the world, and to reconcile those national interests with existing yet changing international realities. The challenge before Sri Lanka's current foreign policy is to correctly identify and defend the country's fundamental interests in a changing world. As a small country, our foreign policy should always be globalist. It should build bridges cross-regionally, reduce or diversify our dependence and give us more scope to engage in power-balancing. A concerted effort must be made to reach out at a high political level, to all three continents of the global South, and we must reaffirm our commitment to our traditional non-aligned foreign policy stance.

What are Sri Lanka's fundamental national interests? The defence of the nation's independence and national sovereignty and the restoration of territorial integrity are clearly fundamental to the country's interests. In concrete and contemporary terms, this translates itself into the eradication of the LTTE as a military enemy. In terms of foreign policy, this means obtaining external support for and limiting external opposition to, the elimination of the LTTE's military capacity. In this struggle, we need the support of our neighbours, particularly the support of Asia's rising super-powers: India and China. China is a reliable and long standing friend and shares our views on state sovereignty and secessionism. However, we also need the support of our closest neighbour - Asia's other rising power - India. A *laissez-faire* policy on her part would enable the LTTE to operate relatively freely from or through Southern India. Given the simple realities of geography - India is a vast and very near neighbour; we will not be safe if India turns against us, or simply turns away from us. For its part, the West has demonstrated that it is not averse to the fragmentation of existing states and the proliferation of new ones. The recent recognition of Kosovo by Western countries is a clear example of this. Moreover, other powerful phenomena, such as transnational capital, neo-liberal economic policies, international NGOs, the influential Tamil Diaspora, and the Sinhala and Tamil 'federalists' also give the West both incentives and instruments for undermining this nation's sovereignty. The West therefore would consider the military victory of the Sri Lankan state over the LTTE an undesirable outcome and would prefer a negotiated settlement. However, we Sri Lankans know from bitter and bloody experience that negotiations with the LTTE cannot lead to a settlement within a united Sri Lanka, and that entering negotiations would only give the Tigers a respite while debilitating the morale of our soldiers. Therefore, as long as the LTTE remains possessed of hostile intentions and a military capability, there will be a conflict between Western perception and policy on one hand, and the fundamental strategic and security interests of the Sri Lankan state on the other. The answer to this does NOT reside in a foreign policy that is isolationist or even purely Asiatic (which is but a regional version of that isolationism). It resides rather in building as broad as possible a network of allies among those nations which privilege state sovereignty and oppose any attempts to weaken the state through external (interventionist) or internal (secessionist) means. This means a foreign policy that is firmly anchored in Asia but not restricted to our home continent; a foreign policy that constantly renews its non-aligned credentials and character (reaching out to Latin America and Africa); and strengthens strategic ties with those states (chiefly but not exclusively Russia and China) that value state sovereignty and act as counterweights to the forces who would weaken sovereignty and the state. H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka Sri Lanka's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva. Our foreign policy must constitute a set of concentric circles. The innermost circle will inevitably be our regional South Asian identity but this should be enveloped by considerations of our broader Asian identity. However our Asian identity too should in turn be surrounded by our developing country (G 77) and non-aligned identities, our Euro-Asian identification and finally by our character as a (legitimate, democratic) state fighting terrorism. However, this last objective cannot be pursued unilaterally, and for the moment, the West refuses to treat us on the basis of this identification. Sri Lanka has to operate within this context and maximise the political space available to it while striving to prevail over the LTTE. A foreign policy is only as good as those who represent and implement it, and if we are to secure the external strategic environment that will enable us to win the war - indeed to continue waging it - the principle of merit has to be rigorously observed or re-instituted. However constructing this architecture is not the main challenge to Sri Lanka's foreign policy. That challenge springs from the changing, transitional nature of the world order. Today that world order is living through the effects of recent changes and current ones. We live in a period of history that is post-Cold War, and post 9/11, but also in the throes of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. We are living through an era that will see the end of uni-polar hegemony but not of uni-polarity since the US will remain the sole superpower, the resurgence of Russia and the rise of Asia led by the explosive economic rise of India and China. All this is known, if insufficiently digested, but it is not all, and the most dramatic changes may be yet to come. It is probable that a new, positive cycle of world history will commence if Barack Obama wins the forthcoming US presidential elections. If he succeeds, he may not only legitimise and complete the liberal democratic revolution in the US metropolis and thereby hasten its globalization, he may also, being himself a synthesis of civilisations, pave the way for addressing clashes of civilisations. That change, the paradigm shift represented by Obama, epitomising anti-discrimination, equality, multi-culturalism and meritocracy, is already underway in the USA and will eventually influence the world at large. Is the Sri Lankan mindset ready for such a change? Defending our vital interests in such an era of dramatic change will require nothing less than a change within our collective consciousness and identity. Our policy, profile and we ourselves will have to change. We shall have to evolve. That is the main challenge before our decision makers and policy makers. Particularly those policy makers and diplomats responsible for conceptualising and managing our relations with our external environment in a changing world. Dayan Jayatilleka is Sri Lanka's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, and holds a PhD in Political Science from Griffith University, Brisbane. The views expressed in this article are his private ones. (Courtesy :

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