
Foreign policy must be a subset of strategy

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by: DAYAN JAYATILLEKA Watching the footage of the massive bomb explosion which killed 53 people at the Marriott in Islamabad, and sharing the concerns about the travails of our close friend Pakistan, pressured from without and threatened from within, I was reminded of how strong and "tough" the Sri Lankan state, polity and society are. As the 1980s turned into the '90s, Sri Lanka had foreign peacekeepers on its soil, a separatist insurgency (LTTE), irredentist strivings (Perumal/NEPC), and a ferocious insurrection of the xenophobic ultra-left (JVP). Any one of these challenges could have wrecked a state and a polity, and yet we survived and prevailed, our democracy and market economy intact and sovereignty retrieved in the main, though we could not overcome the most serious of the separatist threats, the LTTE.

The resilience, determination and consciousness of the citizenry, the competitive drive embedded in the political system and the historical-organic character of the state formation, combine to impart remarkable tensile strength to the Sri Lankan state, polity and society. What is at stake today is the continuation and completion of that long war of resistance, now aimed immediately at the full reunification of the national territory, the destruction of the enemy and the hostile power centre on our island, and the restoration of democracy throughout the country. It's just 08 days since a suicide bombing left Islamabad's Marriott Hotel in ruins. There is much more to be done of course, but as the ephemeral nature of the Premadasa developmental achievement demonstrates, these are the basic prerequisites for anything of consequence, for anything sustainable. If a leadership and government do this much if nothing else, they would have achieved a historic and foundational victory. The current – and historic – task is to administer the "final kill", defeating the enemy decisively, leaving the enemy army with no leadership, territorial base, serious infrastructure or significant fighting cadre. The challenge is to maintain the political and economic space to do this without inhibition or interruption by external actors and factors. The drive for military victory was aborted in 1987. It must never be allowed to happen again due to any combination of external factors. From whichever quarter it may come, it must be resisted at all costs. The address by a pro-Tamil Eelam activist to the annual conference of the British Labour party was the first time such a voice has been given a hearing at the national gathering of a governing party of a big power, a gathering addressed by its leadership. Elections and political change in the US, India, UK, and South Africa could combine with the global economic crisis to create an unpropitious climate and a narrower space for Sri Lanka as it seeks to bring this gruelling protracted conflict to a definitive close. Safeguarding this space for the final offensive – the final kill – is the central and immediate task of our foreign policy. Foreign policy must derive from and sub-serve strategy. Strategy itself derives from a grasp of the national interest. Insofar as foreign policy must be the handmaiden of strategy, in this current phase of history, Sri Lanka's foreign policy must be defence-driven. No one is better placed to grasp the national interest than the office holder whose mandate derives from the nation taken as a whole and whose very office requires a broad national perspective. Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka from July 1987 to March 1990. This is none other than the elected executive – the President, whosoever it be. Furthermore, no one is better equipped to understand strategy than the constitutional Commander-in-Chief, who is the President, followed by the top official in charge of the defence forces and effort, namely the Secretary, Defence. We live in an intellectual atmosphere in which no new ideas on foreign policy, consonant with global realities and Sri Lanka's national interest are generated by commentators, the universities, or think tanks; within state or civil society. In the rest of the region, retirees of distinction author their memoirs, thereby transmitting their stock of experience and ideas to the next generation. Here, they do not. Sri Lankan international affairs and foreign policy discourse seems to consist of two postures: either sycophancy towards or spitting at the West. Both share an exclusive preoccupation with, indeed a fixation upon, the West – be it negative or positive. In this context of the zero discussion of strategic and policy options which can maximise Sri Lanka's autonomy and link us with the like-minded, it was particularly refreshing to read a think piece on international affairs by H.E. Ambassador Tamara Kunanayakam in *The Island*, who in a solidly-researched and sweeping survey argues the case for Sri Lanka to take cognisance of and plug into the highly significant new changes propelling Latin America. An intellectual-activist with a long time interest in globalisation, rights, the inequities of the world order and Latin America, her new book on international affairs was reviewed in the prestigious *Le Monde Diplomatique* earlier this year. Unlike those whose motivation is either personal prejudice, rivalry or ambition, Ambassador Kunanayakam's argument is based on a clearly thought-through project – progressive but not parochial, autonomist and yet internationalist – for Sri Lanka and the global south. The line she advocates is fully consonant with President Rajapakse's address to the UN General Assembly which placed on the record before the world, Sri Lanka's stand: multiethnic and multilingual in approach, uncompromising on terrorism, determined on the restoration and extension of development and democracy island-wide, regionalist (South Asian) and pro-rural on economic policy, principled on Palestine. (These are the personal views of the writer) (Courtesy : The Sunday Island & Department of Government Information)