

MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILM (INDRA DE SILVA)



**T**he formulation of the foreign policy of any country is a matter of legitimate public concern. It should not be a specialised and esoteric exercise conducted in secret in the corridors of power. The knowledge relevant to its formulation and execution should be in the public domain, with the public invited to participate more actively in shaping the foreign policy they want for their country.

It is a truism to state that foreign policy must be based on the bedrock of national interest. The former British Prime Minister Viscount Henry Palmerston, speaking of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British foreign policy famously said: “We have no eternal allies and no permanent enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

Sri Lanka may well adopt the same position, except that the identification of national interests can vary among political parties and from time to time depending on the international climate and our domestic situation. It is therefore essential that we have institutions that can help in this task. The Executive Presidency, the Cabinet, the Ministry of External Affairs, Parliament especially its Consultative Committee on External Affairs, professional career diplomats, the media, lobby groups including chambers of commerce and public opinion are among the available foreign-policy formulating mechanisms in Sri Lanka. They should ideally be coordinated and used optimally to develop a bipartisan foreign policy.

The pre-colonial history of our country from ancient times up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century



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bears witness to a polity that managed its external relations with survival skills and with policies firmly grounded in the

realities of power in the geopolitical context of South and South-East Asia. Sri Lanka, then as now, was inextricably linked with India; and while the advent of Buddhism established friendly ties with the Mauryan Empire in particular and North India in general, with the south there was a more direct and fractious engagement. Trade and commerce may have been among the motivations for South Indian invasions, apart from political and military objectives.

The Sri Lankan kings focused on achieving domestic stability through the development of a unique system of irrigated agriculture, a flourishing entrepôt trade centred around Mantai and the patronage of Buddhism. Disputes over succession to the throne led some claimants to recruit the help of South Indian mercenaries and later to form

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**WANTED**

# A Foreign Policy for Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

**Jayantha Dhanapala** looks back at history and points to the need for Sri Lanka to base foreign policy on national interests and not on forces that do not respect its sovereignty

alliances with different South Indian powers.

In that sense, the Sri Lankan kings were engaged in practising the classic theory of balance of power driven by a desire for security, preventing a powerful hegemon to rise in South India by seeking a parity of competing forces or a stable equilibrium of power. Buddhism and trade, on the other hand, provided predominantly harmonious links with other parts of Asia – especially China, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia with exchanges of pilgrims and relics. Bilateral belligerent action, such as the early 15<sup>th</sup>-century invasion of Chinese Admiral Zheng He that did take place, was more the exception than the rule.

Thereafter, with the decline of Sri Lankan polity and the drift south-west came the Portuguese conquest of the maritime provinces of the island. The foreign-policy objectives of the Sitawaka and Kandyan kingdoms were focused on estab-

lishing relations with powers who could rid Sri Lanka of the Portuguese. In that context, missions from the Dutch were received, leading eventually to the replacement of the Portuguese by the Dutch. Later, the British were to replace the Dutch as a result of developments in Europe; and with the 1815 Kandyan Convention, the entire island went under foreign colonial rule.

Perhaps the lesson of this period, with the waging of war decreasing as an instrument of policy, is to maintain a course of non-alignment and friendship with countries that recognised and respected Sri Lanka's independence and sovereignty. At the same time, solidarity with Asian countries and with countries that were victims of colonialism was an outgrowth of this pre-colonial experience. Thus, straddling UNP and SLFP administrations, Sri Lanka participated actively in the 1950 Colombo Plan initiative, the 1954 Colombo Powers Confer-

ence and the 1955 Bandung Conference, leading logically to membership of NAM when it was born in 1961. Certainly, a common thread linking our ancient period and the modern world is a common antipathy to hegemonism in international relations. Caution in relations with India, especially with Tamil Nadu, remained as a strand of foreign policy, although not consistently maintained.

It is possible to trace an evolution from balance of power policies to non-alignment, as the Sri Lankan state moved out of colonial dependence into the mature exercise of modern diplomacy to ensure its independence and stability. The decision not to join SEATO in 1954 post independence or to join ASEAN in 1967 when the UNP was in power, stemmed from a basic instinct for non-alignment and an aversion to power blocs. The discourse of our politicians is littered with copious references to our glorious past. It would be salutary if we learned some lessons from that past, both in terms of good governance and in the exercise of foreign policy.

The decisive military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009 ended three decades of a brutalising conflict that had a crippling effect on the country's foreign policy. In those years, while fighting for the survival of Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity, we had to focus mainly on defending our human-rights record, neglecting other key aspects of foreign policy. In nearly three years since then, peace, reconciliation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development did follow – and must continue.

Despite this, a determined section of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora with a separatist agenda and some international human-rights groups have conducted a campaign for accountability over the final stages of the conflict which has clouded the post-conflict period and embarrassed Sri Lanka internationally. We have thus not been able to shed the burden of human-rights allegations and resume a normal foreign policy.

The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) has submitted its report to the President. Though its recommendations have still not

been implemented, they do offer a unique opportunity of realising the nebulous 'home-grown solution' that the President has consistently advocated. As importantly, it offers an end to impunity, if allegations of the violations of international humanitarian law and human rights are investigated and punished. That achievement can then be successfully projected abroad through a restructured foreign-policy establishment staffed by trained and experienced career diplomats. This must include a return to traditional areas of diplomacy such as our contribution to international forums in development, trade, climate change, health, labour issues (especially migration), women's issues, human rights, international law including international humanitarian law and disarmament, while reasserting the prominent role we enjoyed in the past in the United Nations, NAM, the Commonwealth, SAARC, and other international and regional forums. Failure to do so will result in a concluded conflict being as much an albatross around the neck of the country's foreign policy as when it raged over the last 30 years.

The foreign-policy formulation and implementation (of independent nations), especially of the global south which has suffered the experience of colonialism, cannot be outsourced to public-relations firms or lobbyists of the industrialised north however slick and well-connected they may be. National liberation struggles such as in India and South Africa were not won by foreign mercenaries, but by brave fighters from those countries dedicated to freedom and independence. The preservation, consolidation and development of democratic freedom, unity and independence through a well-conceived foreign policy based on durable national interests – and implemented by trained and disciplined professionals – is the challenge facing us today.

Will we shirk it, or rise to it?

*NOTE This article is based on a keynote address at the First International Conference on the Social Sciences and Humanities held at the University of Peradeniya on 16 December last year*