

# A NEW APPROACH

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I must state at the outset that if a country cannot take its foreign relations seriously, then it is not fit for independence. In the conventional view foreign relations are important because they are meant to safeguard and promote the legitimate national interests of a country i.e. its political, economic, cultural interests etc. But for a small country like Sri Lanka much more fundamental, in fact primordial interests are involved. Sri Lanka like any other small Third World country, can be invaded and conquered. Our territorial integrity can be in question. We can be broken up. Or we can lose our independence while remaining nominally sovereign. So if we cannot take our foreign relations seriously, we will be regarded as unfit for independence.

Sri Lanka's major problem in foreign relations arises out of its position in South Asia. The coming of the IPKF shows the dangers we can face. Therefore sorting out the problems arising out of Sri Lanka's position in South Asia is of primordial importance. Let me situate this in the context of global developments - that is to say the virtual entente between the super-powers. What will be the impact on South Asia? It is expected that the super powers will not be involved in the region

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to the same extent as before. Though we cannot be sure of this, it is unlikely that there would be the same kind of rivalry as before. On the otherhand, in the long term, if the super-power entente continues we might have attempts to impose a Euro-centric world order. We have to take these possible trends into account in working out a foreign policy which will safeguard our legitimate interests.

### What went wrong?

It is important to ask what went wrong in our relations with India? What went wrong

was that after 1977 we virtually abandoned our Non aligned foreign policy. There may have been economic imperatives for the tilt towards the West in general, and the Americans in particular. But still it would have been possible to be very friendly with the Western countries, without virtually abandoning non alignment. After all the majority of the non-aligned countries are quite friendly with the west. Yet they remain non-aligned. But the

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1977 government didn't understand that. We went much further than what was required in terms of economic imperatives. For example, it was reported that there was a quantum jump in the number of war ships coming to Trinco, there was talk about providing R & R (rest and recreation) facilities for American troops from Diego Garcia, the Government agreed to extended facilities for the Voice of America, it was believed that the Oil Tank Farm was to be rented to a combine with Pentagon connections etc. Why did we do these things, which were unnecessary in terms of the national interest?

We must remember that these developments took place in a changing South Asian context which resulted from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. That was an event of crucial importance for Sri Lanka. India's position on that invasion gave the Americans the impres-

sion that there was going to be a new regional order in South Asia dominated by India, and backed by the Soviet Union to the exclusion of the West. It was to be expected that the US would want to extend its power and influence in South Asia. Sri Lanka's pro-Western foreign policy after 1977 should be looked at in that context. India became hostile to Sri Lanka as shown by the fact that India had training camps for the Tamil militants even before the 1983 riots. Evidently our involvement with the Americans was perceived as a threat to India, and India

wanted to be in a position to destabilize Sri Lanka and possibly get a hold on it.

The situation changed in the mid 80's. By that time everybody knew that the Soviet Union would want to withdraw from Afghanistan sooner or later. Therefore the Americans could not be expected to have the same interest in Sri Lanka as before. Rajiv Gandhi went to the US in 1984, and it is my view that he came to an understanding with the Americans about Sri Lanka. Evidently our former government failed to analyse the developments in Afghanistan and in the region, and

consequently was unable to understand the implications for Sri Lanka. So we had the former President complaining that we were abandoned by the Americans and the rest of the world. But who told him to expect that the Americans or anyone else would stand by us no matter what happened? It was to be expected that with the situation in Afghanistan changing, the American attitude to Sri Lanka would change as well. The world is not run as a charity organization.

I must also refer to an earlier development which probably promoted India's ambitions to become an Indian Ocean naval power. As I see it, the development of Diego Garcia from a communications facility to a full-fledged base was a fateful development for us. Before that development, Delhi thought of danger from the north, more particularly after the Sino-Indian border conflict. With the base in Diego Garcia, Delhi could be expected to look South, and Trinco would be expected to figure in Indian threat perceptions. Our last Government entirely failed to understand the implications of the Diego Garcia base for Indo-Sri Lanka relations.

In my view, the Diego Garcia base and the invasion of Afghanistan, were crucially important factors in the developments leading to the Peace Accords and the IPKF coming here. True, we were abandoned. But that was the consequence of the failure to take foreign relations seriously.

### A new India Policy

In regard to our relations with India, we have to take two aspects into account.

One is the image of India as the emerging regional great power. The other is that although India is a big country, she too feels insecure. We have to take both these aspects into account in designing our India Policy. We must recognize that getting together with another foreign power against India is not going to help.

way. That was why Marx took a surprisingly positive view of British imperialism in India. But India is far from being an advanced country. At one level it has nuclear power, and at another level it has bullock carts. I find it difficult to believe that India can impose a stable order on South Asia in the foreseeable future.

tively far from satisfactory. We have to analyse the reasons for poor performance in South Asia. I believe that we have to examine South Asian culture to understand this. I don't want to go into details about this but, briefly, I think that in South Asia we are paying for the crime of caste. Our social relations are so uneven, and we seem to place a greater value on hierarchy than people elsewhere. The caste system is being eroded, but the caste mentality continues, and it seems to have infected the Muslims as well, except in the Maldives.

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Let's look at Pakistan by way of illustration. Pakistan was very close to the United States, but all the same it was broken up by India. What did the U. S. do? It showed the flag by sending its fleet to the region. Nothing more. What happened to Sri Lanka shows that it can be actually dangerous to turn to the great powers for help against India. We have to depend on ourselves, not on others. We must make a careful analysis of the implications of India's growing military power, more particularly of what looks like quantum jumps in its naval power, in the context of its alleged ambition to become a regional great power. We must take account of the fact that India has more or less unsatisfactory relations with practically all its neighbours. The Maldives is an exception, but there is the problem of Mimcoy which the Maldives claims and India holds. All this does not mean that relations with India have necessarily to be adversarial. New strategies have to be worked out in South Asian relations. SAARC could be useful for this purpose. We should remember that it is not easy nowadays—though it may not be impossible—for the big to dominate the small. The whole trend of international relations is against it. Look at the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan. Furthermore, in an imperialist or otherwise unequal relationship the smaller country has to benefit in some

I would challenge the familiar notion that our troubles in South Asia are caused by India being so big and powerful and the neighbours being so small and weak. We must recognize two kinds of problems. There are problems outside the control of a country. For instance, the Gangeso Waters problem is outside the control of Bangladesh. On the other hand you have internal problems which enable outsiders to interfere. For instance, our ethnic problem. We must therefore challenge the familiar paradigm of big and small powers in South Asia, according to which the small are just victims. It is because we are unable to cope with our internal problems that we have external problems. At least this is true, to some extent. India alleges that Pakistan is involved in the Punjab and Kashmir problems. But we have to ask, "Why is it that India has an endless series of ethnic problems"?

**Future**

We should try to work out a stable relationship with India taking into account both her ambitions and her sense of insularity. But it is not enough to work out a sensible foreign policy. It has to be implemented. And in the matter of implementation, I am sorry to say that we have had a sorry record. The achievement of our last government in Staffing our diplomatic missions with the totally unqualified and the totally unfit must constitute a world record. The position has apparently improved under President Premadasa. But we must take thought for the morrow. A Commission must be appointed to look into what happened, and the full story must be published in all its horrendous detail. As I said earlier, a country that cannot take its foreign relations seriously cannot be regarded as fit for independence.

Let's compare our region with the other regions of Asia. If you take economic performance, not only East Asia but South East too has done well. Thailand is the

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latest example of a country being written up as a success story. But the economic performance of South Asia is compara-

to look after ourselves. The whole mess over the Israeli interests Section shows how dangerous it is to rely on "friends". It appears that the Israelis trained our men and at the same time trained the LTTE in land-mine techniques. In other words, they helped sever legs and then provided artificial limbs! We have to understand that interests are involved in international relations, not just generosity. We have to understand that international relations can be very dangerous. After all, we nearly got into a Cyprus situation. If the Rajiv Gandhi Government had not fallen, the IPKF might still be here. ■

The President has accepted the proposal made by the OPA (Organization of Professional Associations) that a Foreign Affairs Study Group be constituted, to analyse and submit recommendations to the Government on foreign policy issues. It will consist of persons selected by the President from names submitted to him by the OPA. It is expected to commence functioning by February. The setting up of such a Group was mooted in a paper presented at the OPA's Annual Sessions by Mervyn de Silva, Editor, Lanka Guardian.

**This article is based on an interview with Mr Jzeth Hussein**