

## **NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE CASE OF SRI LANKA**

**Ramanie Samaratunge**

**Monash University**

### **Introduction**

Sri Lanka (Ceylon until 1972) became an independent state in 1948 with two neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan. The country's geographical location in terms of geo-strategic importance has been one of the most compulsive factors in security and international relations between Sri Lanka and other countries. It is argued that the country's location in the Indian Ocean has had strategic advantages and disadvantages (Sahadevan 2004). Although Sri Lanka has been able to evolve as an independent entity within the Indian sub-continent, it represents strong historical and cultural relations with India. Even after the British occupied Sri Lanka ousting the last king of the country in 1815, Sri Lanka was ruled as a separate colony. However, the British rule in the Indian sub-continent has important implications for both India and Sri Lanka. During the Second World War, the cold war period and the post-cold war period, key world and regional players have regarded Sri Lanka as an important country in terms of security and international relations, although interest of each key players differ according to their specific economic and security concerns of the time. As a small country that gained independence from colonial rule extended over four centuries, Sri Lanka has always appreciated the significance of the preservation of national sovereignty, independence and the promotion of national well-being, but policy makers have been very cautious about country's opportunities and constraints in relation to the developments in India and evolving international circumstances.

Safeguarding national security requires addressing issues related to both internal and external security issues and trans-national threats, which may come up in various guises. The traditional focus of national security has been changing due to increasing significance of globalisation and these developments seem to have far reaching implications at the global level. The global interdependence has become more apparent, but paradoxically, ethnicity, nationality and religion have regained vigour as sources of identity thereby creating additional pressure on national security.

At the global level, terrorist attack on the World trade Centre, New York in 2001 shows the gravity of security threats that reached global proportions. The experience of Sri Lanka and many other developing countries shows that despite the positive impact of globalisation, the problem of socio-economic instability has become more apparent as poverty, income inequality and social marginalisation continue to grow, thereby creating a considerable civil unrest. If civil unrest is to be contained, the conventional notion of national security needs to be broadened by a more inclusive notion of societal security.

The emerging issues of national security require a multidimensional cooperative approach focusing on broader security needs, which extend beyond national boundaries. The ability of individual states to address them appears to be constrained to some extent due to the emerging challenges in national and international security. It means that if earlier perceptions were heavily dependent on the notion of state sovereignty, wherein security meant the protection of people within the specific frameworks, they are now being viewed horizontally across political frontiers (Sen and Ayesha 2001). Therefore, as the Commission for Global Governance (1995) highlights, principles of security for a new era need to recognise the right of people to a secure existence and the obligations of all states to protect this right.

Economic performance rather than military capability is seen increasingly as the measure of a state's power in the international community. In Sri Lanka, worsening socio-political conditions have been the most important internal factor that impact on its security situation. For instance, political and social factors together with worsening economic situation have contributed to two youth insurrections in the 1970 and 1980s and the ongoing ethnic crisis which generated severe burdens on the country's national security and international relations. At present, ethnic crisis has become so complicated that negative effects arising from it are surfaced in neighbouring and distant countries as well. In fact, internationalisation of the ethnic problem has further exacerbated the situation. The first section of this paper examines the key factors that influence the country's national security and international relation issues during the last two decades. The next section elaborates important developments that conditioned the national security priorities and the key characteristics of international relations which are associated with them. The third section summarizes the findings.



## **National Security and International Relations of Sri Lanka: the Key Issues**

This section uses a sub-system analysis, which emphasises the significance of local and regional stakeholders as against global stakeholders in analysing international system to review national security and international relations of Sri Lanka. As a small developing country which is located in a close proximity of its powerful neighbour, India, Sri Lanka's regional environment has crucial bearing on its external interactions. As Patnaik (2000: 638-639) points out:

Foreign policies of small developing countries are often focused on the protection of the 'political system from dysfunctional and destabilising forces arising out of the infrastructural linkages in the region. .... Usually, the small developing states perceive threat from their big neighbours, and the magnitude of the threat perception is more, if there are infrastructural socio-cultural and economic linkages with the big neighbour.

In the case of Sri Lanka, factors that influence national security and international relations can be explained in terms of a triangular relationship between Sri Lanka, South Asian Sub-System in which India plays the dominant role and the rest of the world. Depending upon the preferences and prejudices of the leadership, Sri Lanka has preferred to alter its relations with other countries, but the nature of relations with India has always been the top of the foreign relations agenda. Ruling elites in the Sri Lanka were extremely cautious about the impact of Indian influence due to three main reasons: power asymmetry between the two countries; the presence of the Indian Tamil population in the middle of the island, and the historical legacy of invasions from South India (Dixit 1998; Kodikara 1965). The potential impact of power asymmetry was a major concern when Sri Lanka gained independence. Sri Lankan rulers were particularly disturbed over the suggestions made by some Indian leaders for the creation of a regional confederation after the British left Indian sub-continent to ensure India's security (Kumar 1977). In fact, this apprehension resurfaced when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) started military operations in the Northeast of the country after the signing of the forced Indo-Lanka Accord in 1987 (Weerakoon 2004).

Even though Sinhalese represents majority of the population of Sri Lanka, their political leaders seem to have a minority complex because Tamils are the

majority of the Central, North and North East provinces of the country who have close historical connection with South India, which is the Tamil stronghold in India. Repatriation of South Indian workers who were hired by plantation companies during the British rule and granting them political rights in the country have been crucial issues in Indo-Sri Lanka relations since independence. Indian intervention in the ethnic problem of Sri Lanka since 1980s has been influenced, among others, by the bargaining power wielded by the states in South India over the political power of the Union government of India (Dixit 1998). The gravity of this concern is further exemplified by the historical legacy of Sri Lanka, which was marked by numerous invasions made by states of South India prior to the starting of colonial occupation of the country by western powers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (de Silva, 1977). Both ethnic groups believe that India is their home of origin but differ in their opinions. The Sinhalese consider that their founder came from the Aryan North India while the Tamils originally came from the Dravidian South India. This historic-ideological dichotomy seems to be remained alive forever in the country's political memory and as a result Sri Lanka's relationship with India fluctuates quite dramatically over time.

In terms of Sri Lanka's relations with other countries in the world, post-independent Sri Lanka was concerned with the growing popularity of communism and hence the potential influence of communist countries. However, since the mid 1950s, Sri Lanka gradually developed close relationships with China, the USSR and Pakistan. India watched this relationship carefully particularly with China and Pakistan, with whom it had thorny relationships. These attempts not only focused on the nurturing of economic relations, but also concerned on security interests that would neutralize excessive Indian influence over the country.

Sri Lanka has been extremely careful to safeguard its security interests and attempted to ease the tension arising from the disputes such as Indo-China hostilities in 1962, East Pakistan war in 1971 and the Kashmir crisis that has aggravated since 1947. During the East Pakistan war in 1971, Sri Lanka allowed all facilities to Pakistan civil and military aircrafts enroute to Dhaka. Sri Lanka's response to the issue was largely influenced by its own nation-building problems. India supported the separatist struggle launched by East Bengali freedom movement against Pakistan and Sri Lanka was extremely cautious of this move. Sri Lankan policy makers were aware that they also would have to face a similar situation if the demand for autonomy by Tamils in the country would be supported by India. Not only Tamils in the island

were a source of constant concern, but the youth uprising in 1971 had furthered the potential threat to nation-building in Sri Lanka. It could be argued, therefore, that initially Sri Lanka, within the broad terrain of non-committal stand, attempted to manipulate India and Pakistan to maintain a balance of power situation to safeguard its own security. However, when Bangladesh became a virtual reality, Sri Lanka readjusted its position in light of the new power relationship that emerged in the region (Patnaik 2000).

The UK continued to influence national security and international relations of Sri Lanka in a number of ways: First, the UK encouraged former colonies to join the British Commonwealth and both India and Sri Lanka have become members of the British Commonwealth since they gained independence. However, India was very cautious on the Sri Lanka's decision to allow the UK to continue two military bases in the country until the mid 1950s. Sri Lanka has maintained relatively normal relationship with two super powers during the Cold war era, although the relationship with the US was disturbed to some extent as Sri Lanka turned to embrace some pro-socialist policies in the 1960s and the 1970s. By doing so, the Sri Lankan rulers tried to neutralise India's predominance by interacting with many states in the region and outside, but they never felt free to distance India from affairs of the country.

During the Cold war era was that Sri Lanka enunciated a peace zone encompassing the Indian Ocean countries with the aim to make the countries in the Indian Ocean an area of cooperation rather than conflict. As a small nation, Sri Lanka had neither the strength nor the inclination to take sides in conflicts between nations, particularly between big powers. By initiating Indian Ocean peace zone, it was expected that Sri Lanka would not become hot spot between super power interventions in the region and in the process it would strengthen relations with neighbouring countries, especially with India. Although the Indian Ocean peace zone concept still remains a dream, it shows Sri Lanka's attempts to neutralise excessive influence made by big powers in the region and the world on country's security.

### **New Phase of National Security and International Relations in Sri Lanka: the Post 1977 Period**

Although Sri Lanka has always preferred to counterbalance India's predominance through developing interactions with other countries and maintaining neutrality some exceptions became apparent since the late 1970s. Although the newly elected

government made clear commitment to non-alignment movement, it significantly altered the direction of the country's development policy which had far reaching implications for international relations. With the introduction of an extensive liberalisation policy that attracted foreign investment, the new government realised the need to forge closer ties with the western industrialised countries. It was significant that Sri Lanka was chosen to benefit from US special assistance to developing countries in the Reagan administration's foreign aid program. India observed these developments cautiously, but relationship between two countries reached rock bottom when Sri Lanka entered into an agreement with the US in 1983 to set up powerful Voice of America (VOA) station in the island, which could be used for intelligence purposes for the US navy in the Indian Ocean (Dixit 1998). These factors partly contributed to the change in Indian policy towards Sri Lanka which resulted in military intervention in the late 1980s.

In the 1980s, Sri Lanka attempted to refocus its regional interactions by seeking the membership of the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN). The move was partly influenced by the need to become a member of a group of countries that realised impressive economic growth record since the 1970s (Weerakoon 2004). However the application was rejected on the ground that the ASEAN was a Southeast Asian grouping and Sri Lanka was not a country in that region. Given the fact that most of the member countries in the ASEAN have defence links with the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand, it could be argued that Sri Lanka's move would compromise nonalignment stance maintained so far by the country (Tharyan 2000). These developments underline the attempt by Sri Lankan rulers to redirect its non-committal stand in favour of pro-West approach and as a result India turned to an aggressive stance against the country.

As the relations between two countries became more infuriating, India turned to help Tamil militants who were fighting for a separate state in Sri Lanka in the 1980s. It contributed to aggravating ethnic tension in Sri Lanka and Indian influence in the country, which resulted in Indo-Lanka accord in 1987 and its military intervention through Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). Although Indian intervention and its outcomes have been interpreted in different perspectives (Dixit 1994, Gunaratna 2002), it could be argued that it is a key factor that contributed to the new security paradigm in Sri Lanka. The relations between two countries become less offensive since the 1990s, the escalating battle between Sri Lankan armed forces and

the separatist movement in the North and East of the country has continue to cause concern in India.

The ethnic problem continues to afflict the country undermining national security, economy and human rights thereby constraining overall socio-economic well being. While a number of countries in the region have achieved reasonable economic growth rates, the country has been struggling to sustain the relatively satisfactory growth record possessed so far. Growing unemployment, especially among educated youth, increasing poverty and income inequality, disappointing human right violations and rising corruption indicate that the security challenges the country is now facing has become extremely complicated. Given the problems of political uncertainty and rising difficulties in governance it is problematic how Sri Lanka would manage these problems effectively.

### **Conclusion**

Like many other countries which emerged with the surge of decolonisation after the Second World War, Sri Lanka has not developed as an integrated political unit when it gained independence. Although the country inherited underdeveloped political infrastructures and institutions together with a fragile economic system, it adopted West Minister type unitary government system after the independence. With the weak infrastructures and institutions in the country, democratic government through central government mechanism has become largely ineffective (Bose 2004). Political immaturity and opportunism together with short sighted economic policies has aggravated socio-economic problems significantly thereby creating a number of obstacles to political stability. Political violence, emergence of para-military groups supported by politicians, and rising corruption have become obstacles to national security and socio-economic well-being of the country.

Rising militarism represents a new security challenge in the country. Until 1960s military of the country was confined to ceremonial occasions, but with the emergence of youth insurrection in the South since the 1970s and increasing ethnic tension in the North, recurrent use of military in the country has become a reality. The more the military become essential to the task of conflict resolution the more the good practice of government becomes paralysed. This is a paradox because the government itself creates a structure which tends to constrain its role as a mechanism that promotes civil participation of socio-economic activity. The focus of national security

is not confined only to conventional notion of border security and national sovereignty, but also refers to societal security which includes security in socio-economic activity. If the country wants to promote socio-economic security and prefers to contain civil unrest, then the conventional notion of national security needs to be replaced by a more sensitive and inclusive notion of national security.

## References

- Bose, S. (2004) Ecolonization and State Building in South Asia, *Journal of International Affairs*, 58, 1, pp. 95-113.
- Commission for Global Governance (1995) *Our Global Neighbourhood: The Report of the Commission on Global Governance*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dixit, J. N. (1998) *Assignment Colombo*, Vijita Yapa Bookshop, Colombo.
- Gunaratna, R. (2002) Suicide terrorism in Sri Lanka and India, in Anti-Defamation League (ed.) *Countering suicide terrorism*, New York: Anti-Defamation League, pp. 101–108.
- Kodikara, S.U. (1965) *Indo-Ceylon Relations Since Independence*, Colombo.
- Kumar, L. (1977) *Indo-Lanka Relations: The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact*, New Delhi.
- Patnaik, S. (2000) Sri Lanka and the South Asian Sub-System: A Study of Sub macro International Politics, in Grover, V. (ed) *Sri Lanka, Government and Politics*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, pp. 638-663.
- Sahadevan, P. (2004) India and Sri Lanka: A Changing Relationship, *Dialogue*, 5, 3, [http://www.ashabharathi.org/Dia\\_Jan.04/India%20sahadevan.htm](http://www.ashabharathi.org/Dia_Jan.04/India%20sahadevan.htm).
- Sen, U. & Ayesha S. (2001) *Governance in Plural Societies and Security: An Overview*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo.
- Silva, K. M. de (ed.) (1977) *Sri Lanka: A Survey*, London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Tharyan, P. (2000) Foreign Policy: Hawkish Advisers Gone, in Grover, V. (ed) *Sri Lanka, Government and Politics*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, pp. 493-500.
- Weerakoon, B. (2004) *Rendering Unto Caesar*, Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publishers.