VI

SRI LANKA'S FOREIGN POLICY — CHANGE AND CONTINUITY*

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General Considerations

For a thorough examination of Sri Lankan foreign policy, it becomes necessary to examine the environment in which the state operates, foreign policy *outputs* as manifested in the orientations and actions of responsible statesmen, an *explanation* of their behaviour and lastly an investigation of the patterns of interaction between Sri Lanka and foreign powers.[1] Such an analysis will encompass effectively the gamut of foreign policy pursued by Sri Lankan governments of different political complexions, conservative and socialist, in the years since independence.

Our view is that there is a line of continuity in foreign policy. At varying points however, depending very much on the personality of the proponent of action, there has been a tendency towards emphasis, de-emphasis, sometimes indifference—behaviour that is also determined by the objective factors of the domestic and international situation.

The question of foreign policy orientation seldom bothered the nationalists of the independence movement in the countries of South and Southeast Asia. Their literature and public statements abound with plans to remedy the domestic situation especially in the areas of economic and constitutional development. There was little attention paid to the external environment. Consequently when power was transferred, Whitehall insisted on external affairs and defence being invested in the office of Prime Minister.[2] Presumably it was hoped that the men who took power, Jinnah (Pakistan), Nehru (India)[3], D. S. Senanayake (Sri Lanka) and Tunku Abdul Rahman

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1. See K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972, second edition).
2. see Peter J. Boyce's instructive article, "Foreign offices and new states", *International Journal*, pp. 141-161.
3. There are some comments and hopes expressed in the closing pages of Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (London, John Lane the Bodley Head, reprinted 1947), but as the author himself declares in the title page, it is an autobiography "with musings on recent events in India"; pp. 573-595 and 599-611 are particularly interesting, but they are essentially tangential to the whole question of the foreign policy of a potential sovereign state, more the reflections of a sentimental liberal. Mr. Gandhi did not have even the kind of interest that Nehru displayed.

(Malaya), not having defined foreign policy goals, and being western-oriented, would not merely maintain the Commonwealth connection but also guarantee the protection of British interests in the new environment of independence. The trust reposed has been amply justified. Today many many years after independence, despite political changes and shifts to more radical policies, all the countries concerned, with the exception of Pakistan maintain their Commonwealth ties. Even Pakistan retains a form of relationship after its decision to quit in 1971 over Bangladesh.

Our position vis-a-vis Sri Lanka is that over the years there has been change but this has been on a stable *continuum* of non-involvement in the politics of the rival power blocs. The end result is that the system, the outputs, the explanation for behaviour patterns and the forms of interaction available with neighbors as well as friendly powers leaves Sri Lanka's Prime Ministers little option but to operate along the only *continuum* of action available, that is, non-involvement but at the same time involvement as an intermediary or conciliator when such action becomes necessary. This line of thought may be challenged given the kinds of personalities involved, Prime Ministers as different as D. S. Senanayake (United National Party, UNP), S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka Freedom Party, SLFP), Sir John Kotelawala (UNP) and Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike (SLFP) but the similarities are there and are rendered more obvious in the synthesis of these seemingly different policies effected by the most astute of Prime Ministers, Dudley Senanayake, especially in his fourth phase as Prime Minister (1965-1970).

The Sri Lankan System

Sri Lanka is an island specialising in the export of three primary products, tea, coconuts and rubber in that order, and in recent times in the export of gems and precious stones and the development of tourism. Most of the tea and a fair proportion of rubber is in the control of British capital.

The export of industrial goods has still to become an established fact as most of the raw material component has to come from abroad and this involves the utilisation of much needed valuable foreign exchange.

Trade is not adequately diversified, most exports going to the United Kingdom (tea) and the Peoples' Republic of China (rubber) while the principal import of rice is from the latter country. Over the years there has been some diversification of this trade but essentially the pattern of British and Chinese domination of trade continues.

Fluctuations in export prices and increases in the price of food imports cause serious difficulties in the island's balance of payments. What is more, Sri Lanka maintains a generous system of social services and is the classic example of the insolvent welfare state. Lack of hard currency compels the island's governments to depend on international banking agencies and foreign states for credit accommodation.

The presence of a sizeable Tamil minority is a relevant factor in political behaviour. Indian Tamil labour works in the midland and sourthern tea and rubber plantations. This Indian Tamil population roughly amounts to ten per cent of the island's population, is in the control of two strong trade unions, the more powerful of which maintains

political connections with neighbouring India.[4] This union has close ties with the Tamil Federal Party (FP), the principal instrument of political action of the discontented indigenous Ceylon Tamils who form some eleven per cent of the population.[5]

While influential sections of Sinhalese opinion regard the Indian Tamil population as the equivalent of a Sudeten German minority vis-a-vis a potentially expansionist India and therefore a veritable *fifth column*, there is as much to fear from the indigenous Ceylon Tamil minority. The Ceylon Tamils reside mainly in the northern and eastern parts of the island inclusive of the coast line. This coast line is the most exposed flank on the Indian side.

The Ceylon Tamils are dissatisfied with the present United Front (UF) government's language policy which they believe provides undue primacy to the Sinhalese language.[6] The Indian Tamils until recent times were a stateless minority having been deprived of voting and citizenship rights by legislation enacted in 1948 and 1949.[7]

The island is strategically situated in terms of India's defence. It could be India's Achilles heel and in its location may be compared to Eire and wartime Britain or Cuba and the United States.

It stands at the junction of important sea routes and for this reason will acquire added importance when the Suez Canal is reopened. In the vast expanse of sea between Madagascar and Djakarta, Trincomalee provides one of the few excellent natural harbours.

On the nuclear map too, Sri Lanka is well placed. Besides affording opportunity for nuclear submarines to find shelter in the deep canyon that lies in the Bay of Bengal which almost hugs the natural harbour of Trincomalee in the north, the seas that lie to the south of the island are also a vantage point to nuclear submarines that would want to fire missiles on targets in both the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China. Such a convergence of strategic location for a dual purpose against a common ideological foe is not readily available elsewhere on the globe.

Foreign Policy Outputs-Orientations and Actions

The proximity to India which is compounded by the complicated presence of the discontented Ceylon and Indian Tamil minority produces a similarity in policy among the major Sinhalese political parties despite the differences they have on domestic matters.

4. The more powerful Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) is under S. Thondaman's leadership. Thondaman is politically conservative and is in touch with New Delhi.

5. Tamil political parties opposed to the United Front Government's policies on language have united to form a Tamil United Front (TUF). Its leader is the leader of the Tamil FP, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam. The CWC is now a member of the TUF.

6. For further information see my *Politics in Sri Lanka* 1947-1973 (London, Macmillan 1974), Chapter 2, "Problems in a Plural Society", pp. 15-59.

7. Note under agreements signed between India and Sri Lanka in 1964 and 1974, it was agreed that India would take back 600,000 of the Indian Tamils and that Sri Lanka would grant citizenship to 375,000 (with their natural increase) over a phased period extending beyond fifteen years.

Both D. S. Senanayake (UNP) and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike (SLFP) maintained the Commonwealth connection. The former was explicit when he stated that a special relationship with Britain and membership in a wider club such as the Commonwealth could ensure some protection against a possibly future aggressive India.[8] Though the latter did not clearly articulate his fear of Indian expansion, he defended his policy of imposing Sinhalese as the only official language on the grounds of possible cultural and economic threats from neighbouring South India.[9] Bandaranaike is also reported to have once stated that he would not rest satisfied till the last Indian departed the shores of Sri Lanka.

However while D. S. Senanayake and his UNP successors preferred to have a mutual defence agreement which included the provision of military bases for Britain in the island, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike had these bases removed. But he did not abrogate the defence agreement. This meant that Sri Lanka could still rely on Britain in the event of attack. Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike herself has insisted that the defence agreement remains intact. Perhaps there is the belief that these bases could be made available at very short notice in the event of attack by a hostile power. There is now a nearby RAF base in the island of Gan (Maldives), and furthermore there is the Anglo-American communications centre at Diego Garcia, also close at hand. Furthermore both S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and Mrs. Bandaranaike believed in keeping Sri Lanka within the Commonwealth, a matter on which their UNP rivals are in complete agreement.

However while the UNP Prime Ministers (D. S. Senanayake, Dudley Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala) had for various reasons a kind of arms length friendship with the Government of India, the SLFP Prime Ministers (S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and Sirima Bandaranaike) developed closer ties. But still and all, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, as Prime Minister, warned his fellow Sinhalese countrymen of the dangers of a pan-Tamil movement that could straddle Sri Lanka, South India and Malaya while Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike's UF government has required Tamil FP members of Parliament travelling abroad to post bond that they will not visit Tamil Nadu (Madras state). Somewhere in the Sinhalese political mind there is the lurking fear that in the not too distant future, Tamil Nadu could well, under the leadership of a separatist party, declare itself a sovereign state and that this sovereign state will harbour territorial designs over at least north and east Sri Lanka.

The fear of India is reinforced by other factors. There is a record of invasions going back through history which accounts for the presence of the indigenous Ceylon Tamil minority along the northern and eastern coastline. This minority is politically discontented refusing to co-operate with Sinhalese dominated governments except

8. see Lucy M. Jacob, *Sri Lanka From Dominion to Republic* (New Delhi, National Publishing House, 1973), p. 31. Dhirendra M. Prasad, *Ceylon's Foreign Policy under the Bandaranaikes* (1956-65): *A Political Analysis* (Chand & Co., New Delhi, 1973) Also, Sir Ivor Jennings, "The Commonwealth in Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 32, p. 138.

9. *Parliamentary Debates* (House of Representatives), Vol. 23, column 684.

at occasional intervals. Both in 1947, on the eve of independence, and in 1956 when the grant of military bases to Britain was cancelled, the principal political party of the Ceylon Tamils, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress in 1947 and the Tamil FP in 1956 laid claim to the strategically based harbour of Trincomalee which is located in the Tamil-speaking area of east Sri Lanka. Furthermore some influential members of the Sinhalese political elite point to the examples of the Indian occupation of Hyderabad, Kashmir and Goa as a foretaste of what could happen to Sri Lanka. And Tamil separatism derives encouragement from the support given by the Government of India to the emergence of Bangladesh as a new state. Similarly Turkish interest in the affairs of Cyprus and Turkish support for a separate Turkish Cypriot state make sections of Ceylon Tamil opinion feel that India or the conjectured sovereign state of South India will come to the assistance of the Tamils of Ceylon should circumstances warrant it.

Despite all the professions of friendship with India, SLFP governments have nevertheless looked on that country as a potential aggressor. Hence undivided Pakistan was looked on as a counterbalance to India. And a leading SLFP minister remarked in private conversation that Sri Lanka would seek assistance from the People's Republic of China in the event of an Indian attack.[10] Such hopes have dwindled after the Bangladesh episode when the People's Republic declined to go to the assistance of Pakistan.

Thus there is little difference between the policies followed by both UNP and SLFP governments towards India since independence.

There is secondly the view that Sri Lanka should remain a non-aligned or neutral nation in the context of the prevailing global patterns of conflict.

Much has been said and made of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's concept of dynamic neutralism, a policy which was sometimes open to criticism because of Sri Lanka's ambivalence in condemining Soviet intervention in Hungary during his premiership.[11] Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike's attempts at stretching this dynamic neutralism to the point of active involvement in selected areas—such as support for the Arab cause against Israel, condemnation of South Africa and the recognition her UF government extended to a number of communist regimes in Southeast Asia—were criticised for their tendency to be obliquenly, and at times, overtly anti-West.

Mrs. Bandaranaike has also actively canvassed the view that the Indian Ocean should be declared a nuclear free zone. While there has been some support for this, her position has been rendered nugatory by the Indo-Soviet pact of 1970. There is an active Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean today and India is the largest littoral state in this area.

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10. As told to the writer by a very close friend of the Minister concerned.

11. For further details see S. U. Kodikara, "Ceylon's Relations with Communist Countries (1948-1966)" in *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 1967) especially the section "Ceylon and the Hungarian Events", pp. 118-121. At first Ceylon was reluctant to condemn Soviet intervention, at the U.N. General Assembly. Then Ceylon deplored the Soviet action. Finally Ceylon reverted to her earlier position of "passive neutralism".

The fact that the original protagonist of nonalignment and neutralism was the first Prime Minister, D. S. Senanayake (1947-1952), tends to be overlooked. Partly this arises from the fact that the conservative Senanayake was in competition with the local oppositional Marxist parties. Partly this was a phase of Soviet expansionism in an easterly direction and as S. U. Kodikara has remarked, "in such a context, it was not surprising that UNP Prime Ministers should have adopted a completely negative attitude towards communist countries."[12] To make matters worse, the Soviet Union was until 1955 vetoing Sri Lanka's application for admission to the United Nations. Nevertheless it was the government of D. S. Senanayake which, along with other Asian states, condemned in 1948 the Dutch police action against the Republic of Indonesia. The same government was one of the first among the nations of Asia—in January 1950—not only to recognise the People's Republic of China but also, at the same time, to sever diplomatic relations with the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan. This policy of noninvolvement in Cold War issues was underscored by D. S. Senanayake in a speech he made over the BBC in London in January 1951. The Prime Minister emphasised that in international politics he wished his country to follow the middle path and not entangle itself in the power and ideological conflicts of the rival blocs.[13] If anything this was indeed the very first time that a Ceylonese statesman had articulated a definite guide line on foreign policy.

However, UNP governments during their first phase in office, 1947 to 1956, consistently refused to establish diplomatic or cultural links with communist states. But again the reason was to be seen in the fear of communism during this time. There was the suspicion that the local Marxists would obtain various forms of support if communist embassies were established in Colombo. India too had similar apprehensions and J. C. Kundra therefore argues that Nehru's foreign policy, despite its proclaimed neutralism, took a pro-western orientation up to the end of 1949.[14]

Nonetheless the policy laid down by D. S. Senanayake was followed by his successors, Dudley Senanayake (1952-1953) and Sir John Kotelawala (1953-1956). The government of the former was responsible for the rubber-rice trade agreement with the People's Republic of China in 1952. The latter's government established trade relations with Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1955 and with Rumania in 1956. Despite his affirmed opposition to communism, clearly manifested at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Sir John Kotelawala declared that Sri Lanka would not join any power bloc or participate in ideological warfare.[15] And he did not take Sri Lanka into SEATO. Notwithstanding his markedly anti-communist stances, the Chinese Foreign

12. *loc. cit.*, p. 106.

13. see the text of D. S. Senanayake's speech delivered over the BBC on "the Middle Way of Moderation as a Path to Peace" in *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. 5, p. 114.

14. see his *Indian Foreign Policy* 1947-54: *A Study of Relations with the Western Bloc* (Groningen, J. B. Wolters, 1955), p. 52.

15. For further details see his *An Asian Prime Minister's Story* (London, Harrap, 1956). Also see his "Ceylon as Switzerland-in-Asia", *New Commonwealth*, Vol. 29, p. 316.

Minister at the time, Chou En-lai, invited the Prime Minister just before the Bandung meeting to pay an official visit to China. This did not work out as Kotelawala was defeated at the general election held next year (April 1956).

However during the regime of Sir John Kotelawala there was a genuine fear that Sri Lanka would find its way into the Anglo-American bloc by entering SEATO. But the ex-Prime Minister, Dudley Senanayake and his influential cousin, R. G. Senanayake resolutely opposed possible attempts to have Sri Lanka involved in any "international entanglements".[16]

As Prime Minister of a "National Government" in 1965-1970, Dudley Senanayake pursued the same policy of noninvolvement whilst maintaining friendly ties with the West laid down by his father, D. S. Senanayake. His government was critical of the U. S. presence in South Vietnam,[17] the American bombing of North Vietnam, the Smith regime in Rhodesia[18] and South Africa's control over South West Africa. The Prime Minister was strongly supportive of China's admission to the United Nations Organization. And his government maintained friendly relations with, and continued to receive aid from, the Soviet Union and China. As evidence of his desire to establish closer relations with the two leading communist states, he appointed former Marxists as ambassadors to the Soviet Union and China.

Thirdly, Prime Ministers seek global recognition in the belief that rival power blocs will look to them as mediators, conciliators or will take them seriously in their cautioning exhortations. D. S. Senanayake was one of the Commonwealth statesman whose views were given careful consideration at Commonwealth conferences. Sir John Kotelawala's attempts at winning the plaudits of the anti-communist world was evidenced in his utterances at international conferences (Colombo, April 1954; Bogor, December 1954; Bandung, April 1955). But he also articulated his view of Sri Lanka being a "Switzerland of the East" and Colombo a "Geneva of the Orient",[19] a view very much in line with the principles of nonalignment and dynamic neutralism enunciated by his successor, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. Moreover S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike looked on the world stage in a similar way as Sir John Kotelawala did. He opined that Sri Lanka had a role to play in the United Nations in a joint endeavour "in which the weak and the strong would be able to render a useful service".[20] He did not however live long enough to spell out this role. But his wife, Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike had greater opportunities of intervening actively in international affairs by offering her good offices on such complicated issues as the Congo, Cyprus, the Indo-China war and Bangladesh. But such activity was no different from the role set out to itself

16. Lucy M. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

17. *Ceylon Daily News*, 5 June 1966.

18. *Ibid.*, 3 September 1966 and 10 September 1966.

19. Lucy M. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

20. From his Address to the United Nations General Assembly on "The New Asia", on 22 November 1956. For the full text, see Department of Information, *The Government and the People: A Collection of Speeches made by the Prime Minister of Ceylon, the Honourable S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike* (Colombo, Government Press, 1959), pp. 20-32.

by the 'National Government' of Dudley Senanayake during the phase 1965-70. In September 1966, that Government in defining its position in the United Nations Organisation stated that "the contribution of smaller and non-aligned nations towards the solution of international problems has in recent years been progressively of a significant nature" adding that it was prepared "to play the role commensurate with its special position in the world today".[21]

Explanations

There are two strands of nationalism in Sri Lanka, one which is western-oriented while the other being strongly indigenous. Both strands frequently meet on common ground. But while the former leans more on the West, the latter tends to make common cause with the non-aligned nations. Over the years however there has been a tendency for a bi-partisan foreign policy to evolve largely conditioned by (1) dependence on Britain and China for trading purposes and credit accommodation, (2) the presence of separatist forces among the Ceylon and Indian Tamil minority which look for inspiration and has hope of succour from India, (3) fear of India and (4) pressure from an electorally influential Muslim minority which compels governments to support the Arab cause against Israel.

At times UNP governments have tended to move a little to the right and SLFP governments somewhat to the left but the persistent trend has been to move nearer to the centre. In this way Prime Ministers have been successful in resisting pressures from their extreme wings to commit the island to the side of one power bloc or the other. However other important motivations such as the anxiety to protect the national interest have led Ceylonese governments to look to diverse sources for insurance against possible aggression. Thus the fear of aggression from a foreign foe or of internal challenges to the established order have obliged Ceylonese Prime Ministers to look elsewhere for the security that the island itself is unable to generate from within —mainly a question of finances. Likewise the reliance on Britain and the Commonwealth by all governments since independence, the talk of joining SEATO, the search for a mutual security system among the nonaligned states of South and Southeast Asia, and the appeal for military assistance to the West, the Soviet Union and some of the nonaligned states during the JVP (People's Liberation Front) insurrection of April 1971 are manifestations of the realization of weakness. But at no time has there been any real attempt at a complete involvement with one or other of the rival power blocs.

There is further a realization that a minor power cannot achieve a great deal. But an attempt is made to make a virtue of smallness as well as to elevate the moral force of Buddhism that is Sri Lanka's special legacy into a guiding principle of international conduct. Hence the advocacy of moderation, the middle path, dynamic neutralism etc. In this way Sri Lanka's statesmen have obtained a certain degree of international recognition.

21. *Ceylon Daily News*, 1 September 1966.

Conclusion

The objective in foreign policy is not to imitate the Red Cross state performing services such as are undertaken by the Government and public organisations of Switzerland. Nor is there anxiety to convert the island into a business state so typical of the Republic of Singapore despite the dire need for foreign investments to promote economic development. The Buddhist ethic inhibits such a search for excessive profit and the Buddhist ethos militates aginst an epicurean tourism characteristic of Bangkok and Singapore. Profit and tourism no doubt are prevalent motivations but society is not wholly engrossed in achieving only these objectives.

The aim is to have Sri Lanka recognised as a nonaligned state following a policy of positive neutralism. This does give her statesmen the opportunity to posture on the international stage—a useful booster in domestic politics. But there is also a genuine belief that a small state strategically situated, as Sri Lanka is in the global context, has a role to play.

The differences in foreign policy between the two major parties (UNP and SLFP) reflect to some extent their competitiveness in domestic politics. But the distinction, as stressed earlier, is a quantitative rather than a qualitative one. On most questions, except one, namely Marxism, the two parties are at one. The only question is to what extent will they deviate in the pursuit of the national interest from the broad *continuum* already set out for them by predetermined circumstances. Even the deviations are effected only in so far as these are consonant with the national interest. There has never been any serious attempt on the part of either party to barter the island's independence for economic or political gain.

There can be honest doubts as to whether there are even differences on the controversy relating to Marxism. The issue is a local one, that of mobilising maximum support—and in this instance Marxist electoral backing—to keep out the powerful UNP. But if S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's views are the index to the current attitude of the SLFP in their electoral pacts and united fronts with the Communists and Trotskyists, then the objective is obviously one of socialising into the body politic, what to this social democratic statesman were political deviants who were also being treated for that reason as political outcastes. In April 1956, Bandaranaike stated that there would be an "explosion" if "you tried to dam up communism". The best way to deal with it, he said, was to leave it free to expand, arguing that in the end it would become "less extreme" and "with the capitalist world moving left, the two systems would gradually even out and meet at a democratic socialist centre".[22] Even though his UNP adversaries alleged that the Marxists were anticipating him in the role of an Alexander Kerensky, they themselves (the UNP) followed his example when at the general elections of 1965 and 1970 they made common cause with the "father of Marxism" in Sri Lanka, Philip Gunawardene.[23]

22. see text of "interview with Ceylon's Prime Minister, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike" in *U.S. News and World Report*, 20 April 1956, p. 61.

23. see my *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State: The Ceylon General Election of May* 1970, (Cambridge, at the University Press,) 1975.

Trade, aid and defence are the prime considerations in foreign policy. On these three matters the two major parties are, in varying forms, striving for the same objectives.[24] These considerations obviously cause a degree of dependence on the outside world. The issue is to what extent should this dependence compromise freedom of action. The answer lies in our original proposition that the predetermined circumstances compel policy to move along a given *continuum*. To this extent the strategic, positively neutralist, Buddhistic middle path state is obliged to pursue a predictably narrow course with very little room for manoeuvre.

24. The talk of Sir John Kotelawala taking Sri Lanka into SEATO was highly exaggerated. As he himself insisted, he had an "open mind" on the question. At the same time he wanted Sri Lanka to be a "Switzerland-in-Asia". It is very doubtful that he would have committed Sri Lanka in the way it was alleged he was planning to do. At the same time domestic forces would have obliged him to take a more politic course had he attempted to join SEATO.