

IN THE SECURITY OF SRI LANKA

Dayan Jayatilleka speaks to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the security situation in Sri Lanka.

In Australia, Sri Lanka continues to dominate headlines about allegations of war crimes and the influx of asylum-seeking refugees, but comparatively little is known about Sri Lanka's history and politics. **Dr Dayan Jayatilleka** is among Sri Lanka's leading and most respected political commentators. A prolific writer, he has published several books, including *The Travails of a Democracy: Unfinished War, Protracted Crisis* (1995); *Fidel's Ethics of Violence: The Moral Dimension of the Political Thought of Fidel Castro* (2007), and *Long War, Cold Peace: Conflict and Crisis in Sri Lanka* (2013). In addition, and until recently, he was Sri Lanka's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva (2007–09) and ambassador to France, Portugal and UNESCO (2011–13). In March, he spoke to defence analyst **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about Sri Lanka's political future; the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); allegations of war crimes against the Sri Lankan state; the causal factors of Tamil secessionism; Sri Lanka's evolving relations with the United States, India, Pakistan and China; and its future strategic options.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Now that the civil war is over, what are the challenges for Sri Lanka's political future? Can Sri Lanka 'win the peace' and achieve enduring political stability?

Dayan Jayatilleka: The protracted mid-intensity civil war has been won, but the peace has not. I have encapsulated our situation in my new book, *Long War, Cold Peace*. The challenge that lies ahead for the nation is precisely to create a nation. We have a state—one that has laudably restored its legitimate territorial boundaries, which are co-extensive with the island's natural ones.

We do not, however, have a unified nation—a nation that considers itself Sri Lankan, irrespective of and transcending ethnic, linguistic and religious markers. The challenge is not so much state-building but nation-building.

Whether Sri Lanka can win the peace and ensure the long-term durability of that peace depends on the nature of the peace. If it is a victor's peace, and if victory is defined or felt to be one of the Sinhalese over the Tamils, it will not be a durable peace. On the other hand, we can only win an inclusive and fair peace if there is a redrawing of the social contract that addresses the root causes of the conflict—the mutual alienation of the island's majority and minority communities—and if there is an equitable integration or a reasonable, centripetal measure of devolution.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Why is the defeat of the LTTE significant? You call the war against the LTTE a 'just war.' How do you explain it in the context of Sri Lanka's civil war and its bloody conclusion?

Dayan Jayatilleka: The LTTE was arguably one of the contemporary world's most ferociously formidable terrorist militia or irregular armed



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formations. The decisive military defeat imposed on it and the destruction of the LTTE as a fighting machine are surely significant and contain lessons for Asia and the global South, though one cannot of course speak of a 'model.'

Despite certain ghastly excesses, which were exceptions, I have always held that the Sri Lankan war against the Tigers was unavoidable given the nature and behaviour of the LTTE. The Sri Lankan use of force was not disproportionate given that the Tigers fielded a larger number of suicide bombers than did any radical Islamist movement, deployed a pirate navy (with a suicide boat component), and had a fledgling air force. The Sri Lankan war was to save its citizenry from weekly terrorist suicide bombing and restore the island state's territorial unity and integrity, both of which are legitimate objectives. Had the Lankan state not gone to war or had it permitted the Tiger leadership to be evacuated, the cost in blood and treasure would have been far worse than it was in the war itself. All told, I continue to hold that in its basics, the war of the Sri Lankan state met the classic criteria of a 'just war.'

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Some human rights activists insist that 40,000 civilians were killed in the final months of Sri Lanka's secessionist-civil war, which they claim was won in a manner that mirrored the war crimes committed at Srebrenica in Bosnia. Is this an accurate interpretation?

Dayan Jayatilleka: I do not want to get into the numbers game either to inflate or deny, because I do not have the answers. I do know though that even the Charles Petrie report, the internal report into the actions or inactions of the United Nations during the final stages of the last war, has a redacted figure, which has been resurfaced by non-Sri Lankan investigative journalists, and that figure is 7,000. As a political scientist by training and profession, I do not believe, however, that the number of civilian deaths negate the 'just war' character of the Sri Lankan war against the Tigers, anymore than Hiroshima, Nagasaki and

Dresden—which may be judged atrocities, war crimes, or crimes against humanity—altered the fundamentally just character of the Allied war against the fascist Axis powers.

I believe the term 'Srebrenica moment' was coined by Gordon Weiss, who wrote a significant book, *The Cage*, but used the S-word in a later interview or article in his advocacy mode rather than in an authorial voice. In Srebrenica, the Bosnian Serb militia removed 8,000 unarmed males from UN custody and slaughtered them in cold blood in a premeditated massacre. The chain of command was also clear because Radko Mladic visited the camp. When and where did the Sri Lankan armed forces do anything of the sort? If the Sri Lankan side had done so, or ever intended to, why would it have sacrificed many soldiers belonging to elite units, in the successful attempt to breach the LTTE's bund-bunker complex, to free tens of thousands of Tamil civilians? Would there have been over 10,000 LTTE prisoners of war, most of whom have been released after rehabilitation?

Any talk of a Srebrenica moment does two things, both of them exceedingly damaging: It belittles the horror of Srebrenica, just as loose talk of a holocaust in any context but that of Nazism belittles the unique horror of the Holocaust. It also provides a carpet under which to hide specific crimes and atrocities committed during Sri Lanka's war, crimes that were exceptions rather than the rule.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How do you respond to the school of thought that espouses the belief that the rise of Tamil secessionism and the LTTE, including the justification for the tactics that the group adopted to emerge supreme and fight its war of secession, was principally caused by the actions, policies and responses of the Sri Lankan state?

Dayan Jayatilleka: The emergence of Tamil secessionism and even the LTTE could arguably be seen as a response to and a result of the behaviour of the Sri Lankan state, but not so the strategy, tactics and character of the LTTE. The renowned scholar Walter Laqueur, editor of the Penguin Reader's *Guide to Fascism*, wrote in his book *The New Terrorism* (1999) that in its ruthlessness and fanaticism, the only parallels he

can see for the LTTE are the European fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist John F. Burns described the LTTE's leader Prabhakaran as the Pol Pot of South Asia. *The Economist* (London) wrote that the LTTE was almost classically fascist.

Now I do not see how the depredations of the Sri Lankan state, which is a multi-party democracy, albeit of an ethnocentric sort, could justify the fascistic terrorism of the LTTE. How can the sins of omission and commission of the Sri Lankan state justify or even explain the murder by a Tiger suicide bomber of Rajiv Gandhi, Nehru's grandson and then prime minister of India; of Neelan Tiruchelvam, Harvard scholar and Tamil nationalist leader; or of Rajini Tiranagama, the doctor and human rights activist whose life and killing by the Tigers is the subject of the movie *No More Tears, Sister* narrated by Michael Ondaatje?

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What has caused the continued deterioration in Sri Lanka-US relations? Should this trend continue to escalate, what are the likely implications for Sri Lanka?

Dayan Jayatilleka: The United States views Sri Lanka through the prism of its competition or contestation with China in Asia and the Indian Ocean, and sees the island as an actual or potential ally of China. The United States is also committed to a 'liberal humanitarian' notion of the world order, in which national sovereignty does not play a major role—unless it is the national sovereignty of the United States and its allies, of course. Significant segments of the US polity and society have been influenced by the highly effective, sophisticated and emotive lobbying by the Tamil diaspora. Sri Lanka's President Rajapaksa is also regarded as too independent minded, too much of a maverick. These and other factors have increased the gap between the United States and Sri Lanka.

That being said, had the Sri Lankan state and government managed the post-war situation in a more transparent and democratic manner, had it been more rational in its discourse and political conduct, had it taken a leaf from the book of Myanmar and opened up, had it been more sensitive to US concerns over civil liberties, had it made progress in its political negotiations with

the elected representatives of the Tamil people on the issue of provincial autonomy, had its own message been more credible, then relations with the United States could have easily been put on a better footing and the elements in Washington who wish to give Colombo the benefit of the doubt would have had a stronger hand to play.

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What of the future for Sri Lanka-India relations? You have referred to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu as constituting a 'permanent threat' to Sri Lanka. Why?

Dayan Jayatilleka: Taking the long view, indeed the very long view, Tamil Nadu has always been the source of a geopolitical and geostrategic threat. Today, separatist sentiment is as high as it was in the 1980s, perhaps higher. Given that 70 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu regard the Tamils of Sri Lanka as their ethnic kin, and given the geographic proximity between Tamil Nadu and northeast Sri Lanka, the abiding Lankan threat perception remains valid.

Sri Lanka must realise that we cannot get the support of Asia, the Non-Aligned Movement, the BRICS or the larger global South if we do not have the support of India, and with an actively hostile Tamil Nadu in play, the only way we can win back India's support is by strengthening New Delhi's hand so it can balance off Tamil Nadu. This can be done by fast-tracking a political solution to the Tamil issue by successfully negotiating with the elected representatives of the Tamil people, mainly the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), on the basis of implementing the arrangements for devolution already embedded in our Constitution. There is no non-aligned option for Sri Lanka without India; no Indian option without settling with the Tamils; and no settlement with the Tamils without devolution or the TNA.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What role does India's nemesis—Pakistan—have in Sri Lanka's foreign policy? Given Pakistan's significant assistance to Sri Lanka, which helped defeat the LTTE, do you foresee bilateral relations evolving into a strategic partnership, or is there a limit to the relationship?

Dayan Jayatilleka: Sri Lanka and Pakistan have always had a solid military relationship. Indeed, my fear is that the new surge of Sinhala-Buddhist Islamophobia led by elements of the Buddhist clergy, and perceptions of proximity of these clergymen grouped in the Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Force Army) to some highly influential officials, may be detrimental to our strategic relations with Pakistan. At the same time, I do not see Sri Lanka and Pakistan growing into a qualitatively closer relationship, nor do I see such a need. Such an upgrade may even negatively affect an already dicey relationship with India.

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Tell us why China is important to Sri Lanka.

Dayan Jayatilleka: China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. It has had excellent relations with Sri Lanka since the early 1950s, whichever the ideological line in Beijing and whichever the elected administration in Colombo—centre-right or centre-left. China is stronger than it has ever been in centuries and it has not yet peaked in its rise. Beijing has supported the Sri Lankan military and our war effort throughout our long conflict. China's strategic threat perceptions with regard to separatism, terrorism and China's high priority for national sovereignty and non-intervention make for great value congruency between China and

Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has, logically, always valued an influential friend far away who could help balance the rather more complex or fickle friend next door. Sri Lankan public opinion has consistently placed China ahead of all others as a friend of the country.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Can Sri Lanka reconcile its foreign policy balancing act with the United States, India and China? What strategic options does it have today?

Dayan Jayatilleka: Yes, Sri Lanka can do so but isn't at the moment, which is dangerously counter-productive. In 1962, during the India-China war, Sri Lanka led by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike was admirably successful in balancing its strategic interests. In her second term, this balancing expanded to include the United States. More recently, during the tenure of President Kumaratunga and the stewardship of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar (who was shot dead by the Tigers), Colombo successfully managed its relationship with Beijing, New Delhi and Washington. So it can be done because it has been done more than once.

What is lacking in Colombo today is a strong dose of realism, which is an imperative given the geostrategic vulnerabilities of a relatively small island. Instead, the regime's ethos today are of an overly ideological, truculent, slightly xenophobic, and rather isolationist outlook. I have defined this in the Sri Lankan press as the 'garrison state delusion.' Sri Lanka sounds and acts as if George W. Bush never left office and the 'Global War on Terror' doctrine and discourse are still in fashion. The Sri Lankan ruling elite is completely out of sync with the temper of our times, not only in terms of the global *zeitgeist* but also that of twenty-first century Asia. If it continues this way, it will find itself on the doorstep of a less than friendly India and an actively hostile Tamil Nadu, caught in an Indo-US pincer, and isolated from global public opinion. Sri Lanka may then wind up with its military victories jeopardised and its control shrunk to its ethno-lingual and ethno-religious heartland.