6 Foreign Policy and Defence Arrangements

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

A small country, and an island at that, dependent for its hard currency on the vagaries of a foreign market which buys its export produce, and on the goodwill of the developed countries and international credit agencies for assistance in its economic progress, totally incapable of defending itself against major aggression from without has in the end not much space for manoeuvre in the conduct of an independent line of action in regard to questions of external import.

But on two matters the island could play a role depending on the skills of its political leadership. Sri Lanka is strategically placed on the world map and could use this position to advantage in attracting attention to what goes on within, politically, and as regards her economic plight. The fact that the country is non-committed and not too powerful gives her statesmen the opportunity to undertake the function of mediator, conciliator, emollient or intermediary in the conflicts between the powers in and around the south and south-east Asian region. In both, Sri Lanka’s statesmen have displayed considerable adroitness in exploiting developments to further their political prestige and in the process garner benefits for their country.

The attitude of statesmen in their formulation of policies on matters of external concern reflects, in a sense, their involvement in domestic politics. Three U.N.P. prime ministers – D. S. Senanayake, Sir John Kotelawala and Dudley Senanayake – were dedicated opponents of Marxism and were in direct conflict with local Marxist parties. S.L.F.P. prime ministers did not look on the Marxists as being a serious threat to the parliamentary system. On the contrary, they realised that only by alliance with Marxist political groupings could they ensure the defeat of their U.N.P. rivals. They tended to believe that Marxist political leaders could be pressed into the service of the democratic state and in this way be socialised into the political order. These differing

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approaches were therefore obviously manifested in the foreign policies of U.N.P. and S.L.F.P. governments or in governments in which either of these parties were the major components.

U.N.P. governments proved traditional, preferring to maintain ties with Britain, and in general to look to the west. The first U.N.P. prime minister, D. S. Senanayake (1947–52), was not inclined to be overt in proclaiming the virtues of such a policy but was cautious and restrained. Sir John Kotelawala (1953–6) on the other hand was brusque in the expression of his anti-Communist views, which brought him further difficulties both at home and abroad. Dudley Senanayake (1965–70), was anxious to mobilise foreign aid to ensure the success of his government. He did not therefore offend the west, but generally cooled off his relations with the Communist states. President Jayewardene (1977– ) follows a similar policy and enjoys tremendous goodwill with Japan because of the position he took in favour of that country at the San Francisco peace treaty in September 1951.

Both D. S. Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala enjoyed an advantage in that neither the local elites nor the general public, except for the Marxist groupings, displayed any abiding interest in foreign policy. The traditional view prevailed that matters of external concern were best left to the care of governments in office, or better still to their prime ministers, a view reinforced by the fact of the portfolio of defence and external affairs being, under the constitution at the time, invested in the head of the government. Besides, the elitist view, backed by most sections of the dominant westernised intelligentsia, was that Britain was a safe bet, the Marxists needed watching, and India could be a possible aggressor.

The S.L.F.P. prime ministers, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike (1956–9) and Sirima Bandaranaike (1960–5 and 1970–7) on the other hand proved more enterprising and dynamic. They took Sri Lanka into the Afro-Asian mainstream and sought a clear identification and rediscovery of Sri Lanka’s personality in the councils of the nonaligned nations of the world. Their policies paid dividends to the extent that Sri Lanka ceased to be any longer taken for granted by the west. Her patterns of trade came to be diversified as a result of bilateral arrangements with the Communist states, and what is more, foreign aid hereafter proved available from both power blocs.

Marxist groupings were sympathetic to the foreign policies of the Bandaranaike, for even though these were not in full accord with theirs—and there are differences between the Trotskyists and Communists—nonalignment for them was a preferable alternative to the