

THE INDIAN FACTOR IN CHANGING DEFENCE PERSPECTIVES OF SRI LANKA IN THE PERIOD 1948-1977

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Introduction

The formation of defense policy is a complex process in which attitudes and images mediate perceptions of reality and threat. The perception of the reality forms definitions of situations upon which defense policy decisions are formulated. The geo strategic factors, historical memory, the political perspectives of the ruling elites and domestic challenges of the day are among the main factors that contribute to shape attitudes and images. In this backdrop, the geo-strategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean in close proximity to India which made both countries sensitive to the each other remains a crucial factor in the defense perceptions of Sri Lanka. In view of the disparity in size and power capabilities between India and Sri Lanka and the linkages of issues coupled with historical memory, the Indian factor always loomed large in the defense perspective of Sri Lanka. However, it attracted renewed attention in the context of the Eelam conflict. The boisterous call for a ceasefire by the main political forces in Tamil Nadu and the threat of military intervention by some marginal elements in South India in the last phase of the Eelam war rejuvenated the Indian threat perceptions (Indo phobia). How to handle India has been a key issue in the Sri Lankan defense policy throughout.

This paper intends to trace the role of the Indian factor in the defense perspectives of Sri Lanka in the period 1948-1977. The emphasis on the perceived Indian threat in Sri Lankan defense perspectives and the approaches and strategies regimes in Sri Lanka about how to handle the Indian factor in the period varied along with regime changes in Sri Lanka, the growth of power capabilities of India and changes in global politics.

Research Methodology

The presentation is based on documentary research. Identification and analysis of primary and secondary sources constitute the main element of research methodology. The Hansard Parliamentary Debates, newspapers, other official documents and press releases are identified as the main sources of the study. The data and information collected from primary sources are analyzed in comparison with the analytical expositions by earlier scholars such as S.U. Kodikara and D.M. Prasad. First I discuss their opinions and then outline my position on this discourse.

Research problem

In the research it is intended to raise two main questions:

1. How did the perceptions about India of respective Sri Lanka regimes as well as the strategies on how to handle the 'Indian Factor' change between 1948 -1977?

2. How did the changed perspectives and strategies reflect in the defense policy formation in Sri Lanka during this period?

Discussion

Being the big brother neighbour, India always loomed large in Sri Lankan defense thinking and threat perceptions. The UNP regime in the period 1948-1956 first perceived and presented India as a major external threat. This threat perception mediated and contributed its strategies on how to handle India. The perception of a threat from India was rationalized and explained for a number of reasons. The conventional reasoning was that it was directly a result of Sri Lanka's vulnerability due to its geo strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Early Prime Ministers asserted that Sri Lanka's vulnerability emanated from its location close to India. Moreover the sheer size of India's armed force also contributed to generate the security complex in the Sri Lankan political psyche. Furthermore there were some pronouncements in India about the need for a mutual defense agreement with Burma and Ceylon.(Kodikara 1982: 32). In addition there were some unresolved issues between India and Sri Lanka like the citizenship question of persons of recent Indian origin in Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless Sri Lanka did not make any anti Indian moves directly during this period. However it was able to rationalize some of its defense decisions using the so-called Indian threat. (Hansard Vol.20, 4/08/1954,C.52).Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom signed a defense agreement in 1947. Sri Lanka counted

on the Common Wealth connection for its defense. Sri Lanka had to deal with India in a friendly manner despite these misgivings. The two countries worked closely in some regional conferences such as the Asian relation conferences, the Colombo Powers Meeting and the Bandung Conference. Also India was able to persuade Sri Lanka not to enter SEATO.

With the M.E.P. election victory in 1956, earlier perception of the Indian threat gradually faded away. However India was still a major factor and how to handle India with due consideration to delicate issues remained a key concern in defense thinking. After becoming the Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike redirected the Sri Lankan foreign emphasis on regional co-operation through the concept of neutralism. (Bandaranaike 1963:P.107).After Mr. Bandaranaike's death the cordial relationship between the two countries progressed. Both countries worked closely in the three non-aligned summits (Lusaka-1970, Algeria -1973, Colombo-1976). In this period both countries were able to solve some long sanded problems. (Nissanka 1984:79). The Sirima-Shastri Agreement of October 1964 and the Maritime Boundary Agreement in 1976 can be cited as examples. At the same time Mrs. Bandaranaike intended to check India by having close relations with China. Even during this period, concerns relating to the Indian factor continued in a soft and different form. It was evident in the Indian approach to the Indian Ocean Peace Zone proposal. While supporting it, India attempted to change some clauses to direct it only to external naval powers.

Conclusion

How to deal with its big brother neighbour was a main concern in Sri Lankan defense thinking during this period. However nature of the perception of threat changed in line with the regime change in 1956. The perception of threat from India (Indophobia) was presented as the main element of the defense strategy during period 1948-1956. This approach changed after the M.E.P. victory. Dealing with India in a friendly manner as a big brother constituted the main element in the Sri Lankan approach after 1956. The relationship was not totally friendly in this period. It can be introduced as a kind of love-hate relationship.

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