

**Ensuring National Security through Reconciliation and Sustainable Development
– In the Context of Indo-Sri Lanka Relations**

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Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Secretary, Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, Chief of Defence Staff, Commander of the Army, Commander of the Navy, Commander of the Air Force, Vice Chancellor of the Kotelawala Defence University, ladies and gentleman,



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I thank the Vice Chancellor, Major General MP Peiris, for inviting me to be a part of this August gathering. I am deeply honoured to be here today in the renowned Sir John Kotelawala Defence University to share my thoughts on some issues pertaining to ensuring national security through reconciliation and sustainable development. While my talk will be generic and based on my experiences in India, I will try to enmesh my thoughts in the context of Indo-Sri Lankan relations. Needless to say I speak for myself and my views are personal. But before I start, I take this opportunity to commend the political and military leadership of Sri Lanka as well as the Armed Forces of Sri Lanka on their victory over the forces of terror. Very few nations have achieved what the government of Sri Lanka and its armed forces have done.

A discussion on ensuring national security must first define or expand upon what we mean or understand by the term. National security is and always will be a prime concern of the inhabitants of a

state and its leadership but it is open to different contextual interpretations. Some people may look upon it as an existential issue. Some may look upon the issue as one concerning a nation's desire and capacity for self-defence. Some others may perceive national security in terms of the power to maintain a government's sovereignty within its territory. Such constructs are valid and relevant but they do not encompass national security in its entirety. The focus here is on external actors as threats to a nation's wellbeing, but internal factors too play a decisive role in the security paradigm. National security hence is more than just safety from the violence of rival militaries. In a larger construct, it must also include overcoming threats to peace, or even to the avoidance of conflicts and confrontations, and to the preservation of the lives of the inhabitants. It must hence also be viewed in terms of achieving reconciliation among the diverse groups in a society.

The military approach to national security presages a strong military to deter attacks and threats of attacks, as well as providing the means of fighting undeterred attacks. This however does not necessarily translate into the maintenance of traditional functions which besides the maintenance of the security and territorial integrity of the state and society also includes the maintenance of domestic and civil order. Militaries can be used for largely negative purposes involving the oppression, terrorisation and repression of the citizens and for the purpose of suppressing popular involvement in politics and civil liberties – an aspect particularly prevalent under military regimes. Rather than bringing solutions, the military can compound and perpetuate existing problems, upholding regimes and personal interest rather than national interest. Therefore, in a very fundamental sense, national security must be viewed as a public good and not the private property of the state or of particular dominant interests.

When we speak of reconciliation, it presupposes the existence of conflict – either external aggression or internal upheaval. The question that comes foremost to mind is why conflict? External factors have many causes which may range from a desire to avenge an earlier wrong or to promote through war, one's economic and security interests. But internal conflict is more often than not associated with justice. And when there is a perception that justice has been denied to a people, inevitably there will be conflict.

One of the causative factors for conflict in Sri Lanka was the issue of language. Language is an emotive issue and Sri Lanka is not the only country to have suffered the consequences of policies pertaining to propagation of a specific language as the national language. When the sub-continent was partitioned and both Pakistan and India became independent nations, the issue of language came to the fore in both countries. For Pakistan, seeking to forge a national identity, a common language was perceived to be one of the means of achieving unity amongst a diverse population, located in two wings and separated from each other by a 1000 km of perceived hostile India territory. It was thought then that the nation could be unified through a common language and the language so chosen was Urdu. It was a language of the courts and in many parts of undivided India it was the language of governance. But it was not the language which was spoken by the provinces which became Pakistan. In East Pakistan, the language spoken was Bengali; in the West Wing, the people spoke Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Pashtu and Balochi, to name the major ones. Urdu was spoken by a small percentage of people – about 3 percent. Inevitably there were riots especially in the East Wing. The consequences were that the Muslim League was wiped out in East Pakistan and a new party

called the Awami League caught the imagination of the people. The person who led the riots was Mujibur Rehman and he shot into prominence over this issue. The consequences ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh in less than two decades. India too witnessed a similar churning but was fortunate to have come out of it much better. Here too, an attempt was made to have Hindi as a common language for the country. The riots which broke out in the mid-sixties in Madras over the issue forced the government to declare that English would continue to be used till such time as people wanted it. Secession was averted but the Congress lost power to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam Party in 1967. Since then, regional parties have ruled in the state, sometimes with an alliance with the Congress but the latter has been unable to come to power on its own.

Why I have elaborated on this issue is to project a view point that too often, uniformity is considered to be an essential requirement for unity. This to my mind is a mistaken assumption. We can celebrate our differences yet remain united – the planks of nationhood have to be built on different bonds. But most important of all is the need to accept the other. Understanding is perhaps the greatest bridge to reconciliation and conflict resolution. Another aspect I would like to dwell on is that federalism does not imply separatism. In the Indian context, smaller states were created to cater to regional aspirations. This has strengthened the nation. A look at India's volatile Northeast shows how the policy of accommodating regional aspirations can lead to peace. A prime example is that of the state of Mizoram which witnessed insurgency for two decades in the sixties right up to the eighties. When Mr Laldenga came out of the jungles to talk to the Centre, the peace accord that was brokered put his party, the Mizo National Front to power. Till date, Mizoram is one of the most peaceful states in India where democracy flourishes and stands as a symbol of the success of the federal structure.

The third point I wish to highlight is the aspect of Justice. Conflict demands closure and that can only come about through justice which not only has to be delivered but must be seen as being delivered. Justice pertains to redressing the causes of insurgency as well as punishing those responsible for crimes against humanity. The aspect of collateral damage is well understood. In a violent conflict, civilians will be hit the hardest; that is the unfortunate truth about conflict. Over time these wounds will heal. However, when people in custody have been killed and brutalised, those wounds will never go away unless legal mechanisms punish those responsible for sullyng the name of the uniform they wear. That is my experience of conflict in India and I believe it will be true for conflict in other places as well. Justice would also lie in the realm of addressing the prime causes of conflict. Otherwise, despite winning a brilliant victory, the long term impact will be ephemeral.

Finally, economic development is a catalyst to peace but not the prime mover. When prime causes have been addressed, sustainable development will bring about much needed change in the way people look at each other. More than a generation has been lost in the conflict in Sri Lanka but the wounds can heal faster through sustainable development. When integration is done through economic dependencies, the effects are more permanent. People tend to merge when there are certain economic advantages to be gained through cooperation and this leads to greater understanding. Looking at some sections of the people as the other then slowly fades and what is left is the elusive unity we all are looking for. Sri Lanka has shown the world how to win a war against terror. It now needs to demonstrate its capacity to win the peace.