

GEOPOLITICS, IN SOUTH ASIA'S FASTEST GROWING ECONOMY: A LOOK AT MODERN SRI LANKA WITH AMBASSADOR KARIYAWASAM

By Michael D. Mosettig

In a satellite photo of the Indian Ocean, the nation of Sri Lanka looks like a mere dot southeast of India. But to the extent that geography can be destiny, this nation of 21 million has a key position in international politics. More than two-thirds of the world's petroleum pass through these waters, as does an increasing share of the Western world's trade with a dynamic Asia.

Sri Lanka is now the fastest growing economy in South Asia, but its path to recent prosperity has been anything but easy. In 2009, the government prevailed in a 26-year civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the

U.S. and other governments had labeled the LTTE a terrorist group, it joined other Western governments and human rights groups seeking an investigation into allegations that the army killed, rather than captured, rebel leaders' as the conflict ended.

Sri Lanka's new ambassador to the United States, Prasad Kariyawasam, told *Diplomatic Connections* that his country has begun a process of reconciliation.

Diplomatic Connections: Excellency, thank you for joining *Diplomatic Connections* for this interview. Your country has been through a rough several decades — a 26-year civil war, the 2004 tsunami. How are you healing at this point?

H.E. Prasad Kariyawasam,
Ambassador of Sri Lanka
to the United States



Photo by Zacarias Garcia of
Diplomatic Connections



Ambassador Prasad Kariyawasam: Sri Lankan civilization spans about three millennia with a recorded history of over 2,500 years. In our history, we have had several periods of stress and trial. But we have always had the courage, fortitude and commitment to come out of situations of stress in our country. In the last 30 years, we had a very intense situation when a terrorist group waged a terror campaign to create a monoethnic state in the north of Sri Lanka. Before that, about 40 years back, we had a Marxist insurgency in southern Sri Lanka. That was also a drain on our country. Our governments have been able to contain and defeat insurgencies and terrorism, but at an unavoidable human and material cost. We are back to normal now. We are in the process of healing, reconciliation and consolidating peace.

Diplomatic Connections: I'll get to the reconciliation later. I wanted to focus on a couple of more geopolitical items first. You're in the center of one of the world's most vital areas, equidistant to the most important sea routes between the Strait of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca. But you're a small nation, only the size of West Virginia. How does your



country protect its freedom of action in such a geopolitical situation?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Sri Lanka straddles a strategically important location in the world, the sea connecting the Orient with the Occident. Our ports have been used by ancient mariners, and now modern mariners as well, as a transit location and more. We are an island nation and islanders naturally welcome external influences, and enrich themselves by the positives of those interactions. As a result, we are today a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious nation. And similar to the U.S., we are also one of the oldest democracies in the world. In fact, as far back as 1931, Sri Lankans, both men and women obtained universal franchise. Since then we have championed democracy. As islanders with no land borders, we value our independence. Like the U.S., we have in our history struggled to retain our sense of independence. Therefore, although we are far away from America and with only 21 million people as compared to your 314 million, we have certain ethics and values that are similar to protect our freedom and independence.

Diplomatic Connections: Given that people like Robert Kaplan and other strategic analysts are talking about the Indian Ocean becoming a place of major global competition in the coming years and decades, particularly between China and India, and perhaps the U.S. from a distance, what does Sri Lanka consider its vital interests in this situation?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Our primary interest is to sustain a peaceful environment in the country and in the maritime domain around Sri Lanka so that the economic and social development of our people can progress unimpeded, unrestrained. For that we require, and we are committed to ensuring, the maritime security around Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean and beyond. In that context we are ready to work with regional countries as well as extra-regional powers to ensure that the Indian Ocean remains a region of peace, with secure sea lanes and protection against piracy. We want to work towards preventing transnational crimes such as human trafficking as well. We are willing to work with all countries that are interested in making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace.

Diplomatic Connections: In practical terms, what kind



Local fishermen pull their boat into the shallows at a beach in Mathagal, situated 16 km from Jaffna in the north of Sri Lanka.



A scenic view of Colombo, the largest city in Sri Lanka, located on the west coast of the island and adjacent to the capital city of Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte (also known as Kotte).



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of port or basing arrangements do you foresee with other countries like India, China or even the United States?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Colombo Port is the largest transshipment port in South Asia. It is a deep seaport that is open for all countries in the world, and it is owned by the Sri Lanka Port Authority, but we have several private sector entities effectively managing piers. Colombo Port is one of the most efficient in Asia. We have another new deep water port called Hambantota Port in the deep south which is still being developed to reach its full capacity. Sri Lankan ports are open for all shipping in the world. We welcome all interested businesses to use our ports for shipping related activities, which no doubt can be profitable. With regard to our connections with navies in the world, we are similarly open for exchanges and for arrangements that can make the seas and ocean around us secure. We are friends with the entire world.

Diplomatic Connections: Given the major countries that are in your neighborhood, how do you describe at the moment your relationship with India?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: India is our closest neighbor and a very close friend for centuries. We have civilizational connections with that country. Our relations with India have remained very robust, and of course like with any neighbor, there have been periods of stress and strain. But, being right next door, we solve issues amicably. We are

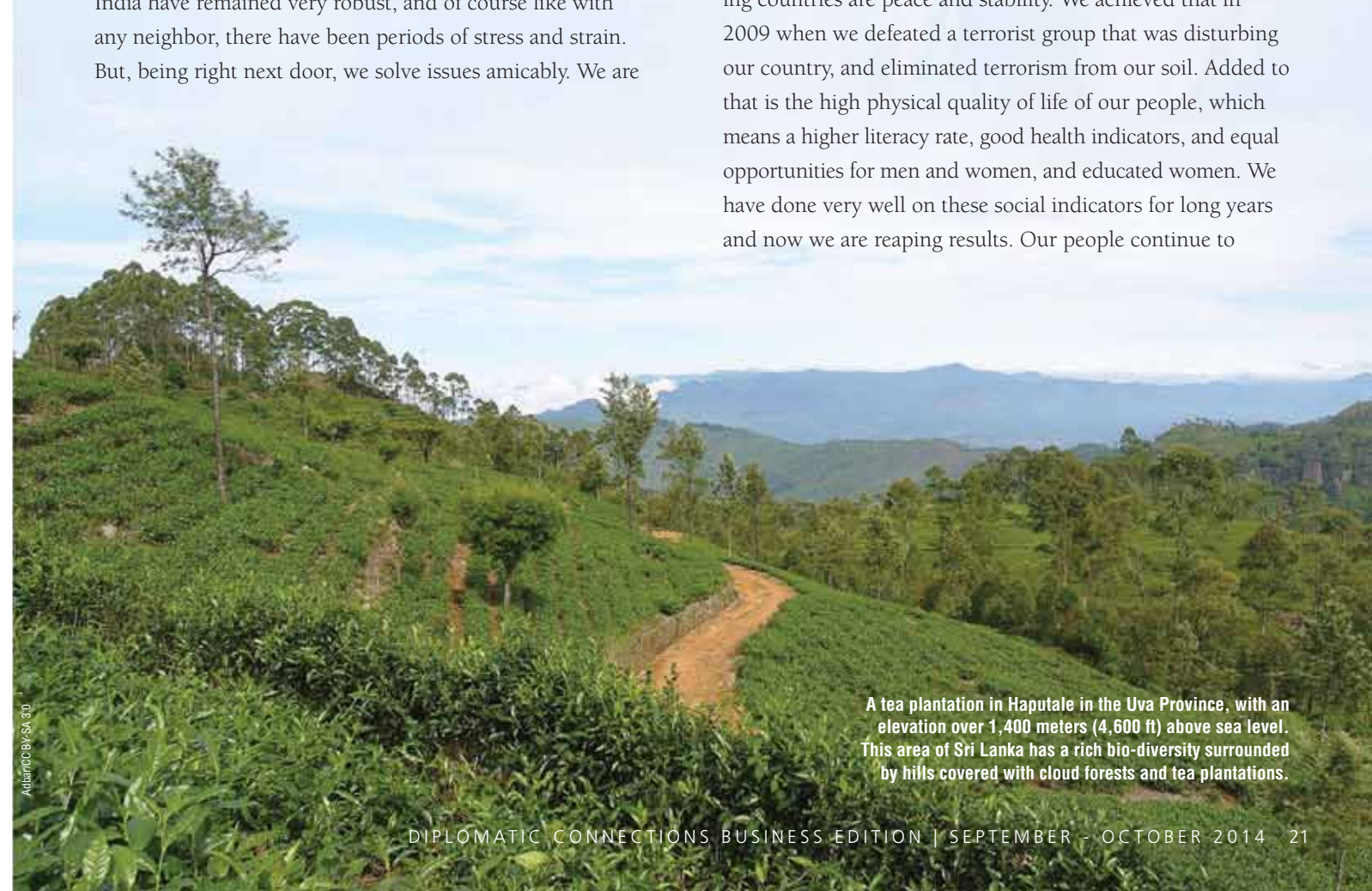
good friends with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries and beyond as well, such as China and Japan. All these relations are mutually exclusive and close relationships.

Diplomatic Connections: You described your relations with China as friendly?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Yes, close and friendly and a commercially and economically productive relationship.

Diplomatic Connections: Some of the analysts I've been talking to say there are two big stories in Sri Lanka: the economic story and the political, human rights story. To start with the economic story, an Australian newspaper recently said your country is going through an economic miracle; your stock market is up 700+ percent over 13 years, which makes it look like a pretty good place to invest. What are the keys to becoming what economists call a "middle-income country?"

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Yes, we are a middle-income country now and our growth rate is the highest in the region, and inflation around 5 percent. We enjoy good macro-economic fundamentals. Keys to success for developing countries are peace and stability. We achieved that in 2009 when we defeated a terrorist group that was disturbing our country, and eliminated terrorism from our soil. Added to that is the high physical quality of life of our people, which means a higher literacy rate, good health indicators, and equal opportunities for men and women, and educated women. We have done very well on these social indicators for long years and now we are reaping results. Our people continue to



A tea plantation in Haputale in the Uva Province, with an elevation over 1,400 meters (4,600 ft) above sea level. This area of Sri Lanka has a rich bio-diversity surrounded by hills covered with cloud forests and tea plantations.



LEFT: The Polonnaruwa Vatadage, an ancient structure dating back to the Polonnaruwa period of Sri Lanka. It is regarded by most to be the best preserved example of a vatadage in the country and is believed to have been built during the reign of Parakramabahu. It is located within the ancient city of Polonnaruwa. RIGHT: A young monk in front of the Weherahena Temple in Matara, Southern Province, Sri Lanka.

enjoy free healthcare and free education, even at the university level. We continue to be proud of those achievements. We are in a sense a model developing country that has reached high levels of development at a lower cost. It is now required from our international friends to understand that we are on a painstaking, gradual and carefully planned reconciliation process. Time and space must be allowed to achieve our goals with our own efforts. Any unsolicited attempt to hurry us or force our hand will only vitiate the atmosphere and will lacerate wounds of the past that will make it much more difficult to consolidate peace.

Diplomatic Connections: Is that why your government has objected now to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) investigation of the events of 2009? This time we are talking about a group headed by one of the world's most respected statesmen, [former Finnish President and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate] Mr. [Martti] Ahtisaari of Finland.

Ambassador Kariyawasam: The primary reason is that we have ourselves set about achieving reconciliation and harmony locally, but at our own pace. It is against international law and practice to intervene in countries before domestic

efforts and domestic processes are allowed time to fully flourish and mature. It seems these are motivated attempts to direct and force our hand toward objectives that are not in tune with what the people of Sri Lanka are comfortable with. That is why we are against international intervention in our situation, especially when Sri Lanka's situation is not a human rights or international security crisis in the world. Since there is no human rights crisis in Sri Lanka, it is baffling as to why Sri Lanka is in focus with such high-level attention. Some in Sri Lanka wonder whether it's due to lobbying efforts by Sri Lankan separatist groups living overseas who seem to be seeking retribution for the defeat of the Sri Lankan separatist terrorist group LTTE. Sri Lankans wish to seek "restorative justice," and not "retributive justice," which seems to be the focus of the UNHRC investigation. Even the current high level set-up of this investigation seems to be way above the mandate given by the UNHRC.

Diplomatic Connections: Well, again, the United States and some other Western countries — India of course has changed its position now — have continued to push this. What do you tell the American government in this circumstance?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: The U.S. and Sri Lanka have

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a long and abiding productive relationship and we value that. The U.S. has stood by us every time we had an unexpected difficulty, including the tsunami disaster and in our struggle against terrorism. The U.S. is one of the first countries to ban LTTE as a foreign terrorist organization. The U.S. is our biggest export market. We have about 350,000 Sri Lankan-Americans, and they are a very good medium for our connection to this great country. We appreciate our relationship with the U.S. and we are keen to further promote this valuable partnership, but there is dissonance with U.S.A. on the issue of human rights in Sri Lanka, especially the human rights related focus on the last stages of our armed conflict with the terrorist group. We need to work on these issues bilaterally to create a better understanding and more confidence in the U.S. with regard to the processes we have in motion, locally, to address their issues of concern. We have chosen a path of reconciliation based on recommendations of our own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, which are being implemented progressively.

Diplomatic Connections: You say “progressively.” Over what kind of timespan are you thinking of? I think there’s some feeling in U.S. official circles that the Tamils represent 17 percent of your population, but they are not yet really fully participant in the economic, political and social life of your nation.

Ambassador Kariyawasam: First of all, that’s a misconception. Colombo City has more Tamils than Sinhalese. That is the capital city of Sri Lanka. Seventy percent of Colombo City’s businesses are owned or run by Tamils, and there are Tamil cabinet ministers in the government. More Tamils live outside the Northern Province among Sinhalese. Tamil is an official language like Sinhalese. The Northern Province has an elected Tamil Chief Minister for the first time. This assertion that Tamils are not participating in the governance or economic activity of the country is a diabolic assertion. Second, with regard to further strengthening and sharing of political power both at the center and the periphery in the provinces, including the Tamil-dominated Northern Province, we have an ongoing process of consultation in the Parliament of Sri Lanka. This is to work out arrangements that would be acceptable for all communities in the country, including Sinhalese and Muslims, too. Muslims are important as they are 11 percent of our population and have their own issues. I am afraid Tamil separatist groups who have been campaigning against Sri Lanka for long years will be having a very different idea of how Sri Lanka should evolve. Sri Lanka is not a country that is looking at mono-ethnic separatist entities, but

at multi-ethnic, multicultural integrated regions, like those in the United States.

Diplomatic Connections: Do you have any idea of when that goal might be achieved?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: We had a 30-year conflict with its attendant pain, emotional baggage and feelings of historic injustice perceived by all communities. These have to be handled step by step. You cannot heal all wounds overnight and we have to allow time and space. Just look at other situations in the world to see how much time has been taken in such scenarios. But we have been one of the fastest in rehabilitation and healing activities with certain landmark achievements. Let me tell you a few. At the end of the conflict, we rescued nearly 300,000 Tamils from LTTE custody. We resettled all of them within two-and-a-half years. That’s a record. We had about 11,000 LTTE cadres in custody by the end the conflict. Almost all of them have been rehabilitated and released. We had large tracts of mined areas and all have been de-mined. In many other post-conflict situations around the world, people are still trying to de-mine. What we have achieved is monumental. But, when you deal with hearts and minds, initiatives can take even more time.

Diplomatic Connections: You’ve had a very interesting diplomatic career serving in a lot of important posts, including the United Nations and India — your most important neighbor. How has that prepared you for this job, which as we have been discussing, the relations with the United States have had their ups and downs? So how do you feel taking on this job as a new ambassador here — taking on this job in this city, which has its own funny ways of doing business?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: I look forward to this challenge. I worked here at this embassy from ’95 – ’98. I recall during that time, in 1997, when I was here, the U.S. naming LTTE as a foreign terrorist organization. I have good memories of the U.S. as a country that stood by us then, and I don’t think that our relationship with the U.S. is down. It’s only some dissonance in terms of some issues that we have to find the best possible way forward, so that we can work in tandem. That is what I have set about to achieve. We think of the U.S. as a country which we should have a strong and sustained relationship with. My objective will be to achieve a relationship that we can call as having reached a level of irreversible excellence.

Diplomatic Connections: The United States is now your largest export market. What are you doing to encourage even more, and particularly more American, investment in Sri Lanka?



Ambassador Kariyawasam: We are very eager that the U.S. engages with us economically, much more than now. There is great potential for investment for U.S. companies in Sri Lanka. We think U.S. businesses should look at Sri Lanka as a launching pad to reach the Indian subcontinent and leap into East Africa and to Southeast Asia by using the excellent sea connections we have from Colombo Port and Hambantota Port. Around Hambantota Port you have large tracts of land that can be used for manufacturing for export. We think U.S. investment could look at Sri Lanka as a manufacturing hub for production and for sale into the whole of Indian Ocean littorals.

Diplomatic Connections: On that point, you’re getting a million tourists a year, but most of them come from Europe and an increasing number are coming from China. Any plans afoot to try and encourage more American tourism in your country?

Ambassador Kariyawasam: We would welcome more American tourists, but we recognize we’re a little far away. In

a sense, we need to create packages that will attract American tourists, like for instance let’s say a total experience in tea and ancient culture. This means tea connoisseurs could go to Sri Lanka, stay in very comfortable accommodation in a hill country tea garden, drink and feel tea. Then they could marvel at monuments of our ancient civilization and feel our culture as well. Of course around our country there is warm sea water and golden sands. We can attract U.S. tourists for very specific excursions that will suit their individual tastes. Sri Lanka is one of the unique countries in the world where you can see the largest sea animal, whales, and the largest land animal, elephants, from the same location. Near the city of Trincomalee, one can sit in a place near the sea and on one side one can see elephants, the other side one will see whales frolicking in the sea.

Diplomatic Connections: I’ll have to get there myself. Excellency, thank you very much for this interview with Diplomatic Connections. We appreciate it.

Ambassador Kariyawasam: Thank you very much. ■