



President Ranil Wickremesinghe's full speech at the graduation ceremony of the National Defence College on 14th September, 2022

“We are having this ceremony, amidst the mourning for the longest serving Commander In Chief of the armed forces, Her Majesty Elizabeth II, Queen of Ceylon and Commander In Chief of Ceylon's armed forces.

So only after she gave up that position, that we found unfortunate internal conflicts which led to the expansion and development of our armed forces. I'm happy to be with you here today. You are the first batch to graduate after then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared open this institute. The Commandant told me that by the next batch, we'll have civilians from the government service, and thereafter there will also be foreign students. I would like to tell the Commandant if we are going to have foreign students, why don't we get foreign lecturers also? It can be done on Zoom or otherwise. It will certainly add more value and the quality of instructions given here.

But it's all of you who have passed out in the first batch who will establish the standards. Your display, your commitment to your work will establish the standards of this institution. That is up to you. I won't take too much to say of this, except to remind you of a line from my old school song. They kept thy fame inviolate. That's what we would expect, all of you who graduated now and later on, to do.

When the National Defence College was mooted and they were looking at the site, I am the person who suggested this building, known as Mumtaz Mahal which was actually the residence of Admiral Geoffrey Layton Commander in Chief of Ceylon. He came here in 1942 and the stabilization of British and the Allied power in the Indian Ocean was done during his time. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten came only in 1944. By that time, the task was over. What was his role? What did he do? Because Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the Easter Raid and the fact that we retained it, was the most momentous period of the war. There are references to this attack and to the role of Sri Lanka, Ceylon in 1942, amongst others in the diaries of Lord Allen Brooke and some of the other commanders of the time. It is acknowledged that we did play a role. And what is the role that Admiral Layton took? That has never been assessed? Many of them say that he played an important role, while there are a few who are his critics.

So looking back, maybe we can now assess the role he played when Sri Lanka had a strategic or the most strategic position in the Indian Ocean. Now that the college has started here in the same premises our importance has not depreciated. If at all, it has appreciated.



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The geopolitics of the Indian Ocean has unfortunately made us the punching bag for Hambantota. Actually there are about 17 ports that are operated by the Chinese in the Indian Ocean. Different companies. There are some more ports that are operated by Dubai World ports. Now, all the ports are commercial ports.

So is Hambantota. It is not a military port. If there is security significance, it is in the port of Darwin in Australia where you have, as they say, the Chinese ports are operating side by side with the area with the Australian and the US forces used for training. We don't have that. We don't allow anyone to come and train here, but we do have our southern command of the navy. We have a divisional headquarters of the army and we have a detachment of the Air Force. But none of them are involved. They only ensure that this is a commercial port and no less.

So though we are a commercial port, it shows our strategic importance that many people sort of come to conclusions which are unwarranted. And I hope the next agreement we come to with China, will not cause such speculation, and it is only about debt reduction for Sri Lanka.

But I think it gives me an occasion also to speak to you about what our position is in the Indian Ocean. Firstly, there is an Indo-Pacific. There are many definitions. Indo-Pacifics that end up in the western coast of India, Indo-Pacifics, that go further on. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, we accept the definition of ASEAN that these are two separate oceans joined together. When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Lok Sabha, he referred to the confluence of two oceans. Therefore that is necessary for us because the security situation here is different from that of the Pacific. Pacific, has always, gone around that of the hub and spoke system. And there is tension as we know today in the Taiwan Strait and other parts. The Indian Ocean is different.

First and foremost in the region, the biggest tension does not come from the sea. It comes from the Himalayas. Where, two new nuclear powers, face each other. Secondly, it comes from the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea where bases are being established and militarization is going on. In fact, all those who are militarizing the Horn of Africa, point to us who have not militarized anything, and they say we are the ones who are doing it. So this is the irony of life and the irony of being a small nation.

Nevertheless, we do not want the tension in the Pacific to flow over here. It's not only us. ASEAN doesn't want it. They don't want it to come beyond the South China Sea. So we are with ASEAN on that. This has become one group for two reasons, one is the Belt and Road Initiative, the other is the Quad. But for us, while we don't participate in military alliances, we certainly do not want the problems of the Pacific coming into the Indian Ocean. So let us look at how we can maintain our stability. Because we do this because we want the Indian Ocean to be stable and to be open to all. That's why we have asked for a code of conduct for the Indian Ocean and see freedom of navigation to apply and the code of conduct and also the freedom of undersea cables. That is important for commerce to carry on.



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We have to remember that bulk of the petroleum supply, energy supply to the world goes through the Indian Ocean. A large amount of shipping goes through the Indian Ocean. We don't want this to be an area of conflict and area war. And this is one of the reasons that worry me, because I am in total agreement with the Prime Minister of Singapore and the Deputy Prime Minister who refer to the fact that you can have unwarranted war, very well described by Barbara Tuchman in her book, The Guns of August. How Europe Stumbled in to War, Lost Their Empires, and finally, after World War II led to the rise of Asia. Nevertheless, it's a very, very interesting book that you all should read.

We don't want that. We want there to be peace and harmony. Thirdly, we don't want to see big power rivalry in the ocean, because that big power rivalry gets reflected everywhere. We are not against and we don't say that Indian Ocean should be locked out for others. In 1977, we said that the Indian Ocean peace zone did not prevent the American fleet from being present there.

I as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs had to break the news and also to face the criticism that came from our area. But they can be here. Subsequently, we have seen the Japanese maritime defence forces here. Certainly, we are not against it. We like to see them here. And then you have seen the People's Liberation Army, navy here. Its not only there. Many other European navies are now coming in here. So these are developments. If the navies want to come, we have no problem. They helped in the anti-piracy operations. But we don't want a level of rivalry which will affect the security and the peace of our area.

Sri Lanka will not take part in any big power rivalry that we had decided from the time of the right honorable the Senanayake, It was shown in the Colombo Power's confidence in the nonaligned conferences. Whatever it be that we will not join any big power or take sides, we will stay out of it. And that's why we want to ensure that the big powers and the rivalry doesn't need to certainly lead to conflict in the Indian Ocean. That's one thing we can't afford. We are faced with so many problems, non-military. Look at the question today. We are facing many of our countries of the shortage of food, of economic development, of global climate change. Those are more than sufficient for us to focus on. We don't want our attention taken away by others.

Then when it comes to the security of Sri Lanka, we are of the view that in looking after the security of Sri Lanka that we must also ensure that nothing adverse happens to the security of India. That we have been committed to, and we will go ahead with it. There will be no movement out of it. And certainly, our security. That's why we work with India on the Colombo conclave, on the trilateral security arrangements and many other fields, especially outside the military field of piracy, of human trafficking, of drugs. All those are useful ways in which we cooperate with India and the other island states.

Then we also value our friendship with Maldives, those small islands, and we know how important the Maldives is. We all have to ensure that the 8-degree channel and the 9-degree channel are not blocked. One is on the boundary with India, one is within Maldives.



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What can we do? We can only help to train and strengthen members of the armed forces, as I have asked the secretary defence and the chief of defence staff, that we should, in fact increase the amount of people from Maldives that are being trained here. So this is our policy. And we will operate in this context. Then the next part of it, what do we do?

I think we have to now look at the defence and security of Sri Lanka. That's why we want to have Defence 2030 report. Firstly, look at the whole region. And that's a study not only by the defence ministry, by the Foreign Ministry, by the Finance Ministry, looking at the economic trade, the related trade, integration by the Environment Ministry and the new Climate Change Secretariat I will, have within the President's office to get together and with other, concerned ministries and departments look at the situation, the security situation in the Indian Ocean. Then there's a question of what our security forces should be. What are the challenges we are going to face we are not going to get involved in a war. But what are the challenges we face and what are we going to do about it? That we have to decide because now we have to move out of the phase we were in. We had to fight the war. We have now concluded the war victoriously.

Now we have to bring peace, which we are doing. And there will be a final settlement, I hope, in the next few months with the Northern and the Tamil people. I've been talking with the Tamil parliamentarians. But we have to think about the future.

Even terrorism today, is not the terrorism we faced earlier. It's of a different nature. I hope we won't have it. But we must take all precautions against it. The other thing is that other terrorists can use Sri Lanka to attack third parties. Now that that danger is there. So that is one. Secondly, within the security of Sri Lanka and the defence of Lanka. What is the role of the army? What is the role of the Navy? What is the role of the Air Force? Whatever we do, we have to remember that we have a budget. Unfortunately, I happen to be both defence minister and finance minister. It's, I think, a conflict of interest. But nevertheless, we have to get along with it. Then you look at the new, what warfare going to be. We have to identify. I was reading the Integrated Defence Review UK, which Minister Ben Wallace introduced last year in parliament. It was very interesting, the second chapter. They had what is called a future battlefield. Now that is for UK. What is the future battlefield for us? What is our role in that battlefield? What are we going to do? How are we going to restructure the armed forces? What about the cyberspace? Are the existing armed forces is going to do it or are you going to have a separate force?

So there are so many issues. Even the space, as we know, has become a scene of conflict. So what is our role and what are the armed forces and what we are going to do that is within our budgets? Which also means we have a very high expenditure on defence. So we have to gradually reduce it as a percentage of the GDP. But we could all be committed to a fast growing economy if we can go instead of 5% to 7 or 8%, then as the economy grows, your share will grow. So we all have a hand in ensuring a speedy development and a fast rate of growth in this country for the next decade or two. That would then give you the financial space.



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Then the most important issue climate change, the environment. Now, what is the role we have to play in the armed forces? It's going to be important. And of course, we have the non-state actors in the area. So we have got to work with them. We will see new armed forces coming in. I could see some of the Gulf countries especially coming out and having the armed forces. The UAE, with its access on the Yemen port, will certainly be an important role on the western Indian Ocean. There will be others. So let's look at the new situation, how the armed forces will develop and how we ensure our security and ensure there is absence of tension and combat in the area. That's all that we can do.

We by ourselves can't do so. We have to talk with other countries which have a similar view. So this is what our future would be. And I will ask the secretary, defence and some of the others to look at the groundwork for defence 2030. And many of you in the armed forces and outside could make your contribution, because this is really the future of our country. If you don't have a good defence system, your future is gone. The world situation and the geopolitics will get worse. It won't get better. So let us get ready. There are so many conflicting power plays between China and the West, between Asia and the West.

Then there are new added powers that are coming in. The regional powers. The sub regional powers. What is the role of Indonesia, which really controls the sea between India, Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean? So these are many, many issues that we will have to focus on and we have to get ready for it.

This defence college then is producing the human resources who would play a leading role in looking at our defence structure. And I would ask all of you to put on your thinking cap and make a contribution. But we have to now think of the defence of Sri Lanka and the role of armed forces in 2030 and beyond.

Thank you.”

President Media Division
15-09-2022