
4. Evolving a Sri Lankan National Security Strategy (NSS) in a Turbulent Security Environment: Insights from Japan

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Abstract

Last half decade for the world and the strategically vital regions of Indian and Pacific Oceans home to Sri Lanka and Japan has been a turbulent one. Unravelling of the global order, challenges to regional cooperation and its mechanisms, to renewed geo strategic rivalries has created a unique security condition in the 21st century. Parallel to these global conditions, Sri Lanka's recent internal transformations are historically unprecedented, it has been a journey of extreme shocks and efforts of emergency mitigation from Covid 19, to the political uprising popularly known as Aragalaya to depose a democratically elected president, to a financial meltdown and currently to bring to power a new political force, a hybrid between a traditional Marxist party and socialist liberal urban formation. Given the speed at which Sri Lanka's domestic body politic has shifted, the emerging security challenge is how Sri Lanka will manage, articulate and navigate the external volatile, dynamic and fluid security environment. Sri Lanka's current administration in legislature and in presidency brought to power by one of the largest historical majorities in a recent election is compelled to forge a national security strategy which is reflective of its domestic compulsions yet agile and resilient enough to withstand constant external shocks. This article argues for Sri Lanka to contribute and thrive in a fast-evolving security landscape it can draw lessons from Japan's recent National Security Strategy and its comprehension and response to the new security environment in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. The Article will explore policy choices, policy challenges and external security realities of the time in shaping the foreign and security relations of a pivotal node in the Indian ocean region.

Keywords: International Security, Indian Ocean, NSS, Sri Lanka, Japan, Regional security

1. Introduction

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 (Ranil Wickramasingh 2022).

This article explores the policy challenges for a small state that is navigating two great transformations, first an internal and second responding to an external fluid strategic environment. Attempting to distil the idea of rationality in state decision making and foreign policy articulation as deeply analysed by Mearsheimer (2023), where the Japanese presentation of the principal of Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) is explored as a rational decoding of a strategic space. The policy focus from this article is connecting the decision-making debate to how policies can be framed to respond to the two key transformations that were flagged above in articulating a national security strategy for Sri Lanka and amidst the ongoing financial crisis and post upheaval (*Aragalaya*) political formation with the rise of National Peoples Power (NPP) government.

In this context the key juxtaposition to framing a national security strategy will be made to the National Security Strategy of Japan 2022. This analysis was to be written within two fast moving internal and external conditions, the expected shifts in domestic policy landscape and as many research and analysis institutions, policy analysts and academics forecasted a geopolitically charged region shaped mainly by the thrust of global power rivalries and in that context Sri Lanka's search for diplomatic manoeuvring as a small state to mitigate external shocks and accommodating domestic political directions.

2. The necessity for a National Security Strategy for Sri Lanka

The article charts Sri Lanka's internal soul searching for change and stability in the aftermath of a political upheaval and a near economic meltdown and a sea change in the political landscape redrawing Sri Lanka's political tapestry with an unprecedented change in composition of the legislature powered by the first left party candidate to clinch the executive presidency. The core problem in the analysis is the impact of the external environment on Sri Lanka's strategic choices and its compulsion to project ambitions and reap benefits of the surge of interest and importance of the maritime domain as a maritime nation.

The author argues that the best approach to this navigation is to come up with a strategic road map for the country's future and in doing so, through the means of a national security strategy (NSS SL) as it is an opportune moment for the drafters as Sri Lankan government has registered an outright 2/3 majority enabling a more easier way of passage of parliament for any new laws or acts especially as sensitive and controversial as a national security policy.

Samuel Huntington (1961) writes that defence policy is Janus like existing in both the worlds of international and domestic politics. Meaning of defence according to Snyder (1977) is the ability to mitigate reducing our own costs and risks when other aspects such as deterrence fails. It basically means reducing an enemy's capacity to damage or deprive us. National security in peace time is about developing defence capability to deter and defence as a wartime value. Security dilemma arise from the absence of authority over states and no guarantee of order among states, with no clear institutional architecture and no accepted norms especially during intense geopolitics. In that context, the need for stabilization and diplomatic pragmatism and its accommodation is what FOIP represents and needs to be further explored by Sri Lankan strategic and policy communities.

3. Central argument

The central argument of the analysis is to explore the importance of framing a national security strategy for Sri Lanka enabling coherent and focused policy responses to navigate the state amidst the two major endogenous and exogenous shockwaves mentioned above. The fast-moving pace of the geopolitical landscape is outpaced recently by the unprecedented levels of break from fundamental policy positions the United States held since the end of the world war. The year 2025 seems to be signalling a break from the established ways of international relations, norms that were followed and world views of the United States leadership. Instead of seeking a rules based order, American leadership is hedging more on maverick manoeuvres and bold transactional trade tactics from tariffs to sanctions that are imposed on friends and perceived foes or competitors, where traditional friends seem to be the victims.

Apart from the fact that Sri Lanka through its internal turmoil have managed to overcome contradictions by the rise of power, a formidable political force which endows the strategic community search for a national security strategy whilst looking at the impending global uncertainties and the increased weaponization of global systems, institutions and networks, it makes it more than relevant and necessary for a small power with strategic locational significance to find its ground and its positions. With an absence of a regional institutional architecture and with a fluid larger regional situation, a pragmatic approach to strategic regional interaction such as FOIP and Japan's example of integrating FOIP to its NSS provides an important precedent for Sri Lanka. The article broadly explores the key domestic developments that led to significant political transition. It argues that if the external contradictions to be managed, a robust NSS, which is both domestically pragmatic and externally guiding is essential.

4. Sri Lanka's Economic Quagmire

In 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its loan payments for the first time in its history since independence, taking the country spiraling into an economic crisis triggering significant change in its political landscape. Sri Lanka's economic crisis came at a time during the intensification of global uncertainty and instability.

Munich Security Conference report for 2022 was titled 'Collective Helplessness' where even the geopolitical West was reeling from a multiple set of poly-crises.

Sri Lanka confronted its own demons of fiscal policy blunders and economic policy misalignment contingent upon a series of policy and political errors which were structurally visible with a perpetual twin deficit dominating throughout history. The fiscal deficit and the current account deficit meant that the country consistently spends beyond its means and consumes more than it produces. With constant access to concessional financing from multilateral and bilateral donors paved way for the island to sustain both fiscal and external deficits and bankroll its economy.

This cycle ended with the elevation of Sri Lanka to middle-income status, access to such low-cost financing was curtailed. Sri Lanka did not resort to adjusting to this new reality and continued its borrowing spree, with less access to concessional borrowing, a policy blunder resulted in turning to alternative sources of financing, including borrowing from international financial markets and commercial lenders at higher interest rates and shorter maturities.

Riding the popularity and the expectation of a peace dividend, Mahinda Rajapaksa administration (2005-2014), in the aftermath 2009, embarked on a number of large-scale infrastructure projects financed chiefly by significant borrowings (Klem, 2020). War time popularity of the Rajapakse regime faded in less than a decade leading to his defeat in 2015. The new government which was a coalition, popularly coined as 'Yahapalana' denoting good governance from 2015 and 2019, had to repay the interest on outstanding loans accumulated by the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime (Verite Research, 2022) by sourcing commercial loans mainly from sovereign bonds. This non-concessionary foreign debt, which was below 5 percent in 2006 rose to 52 percent by 2014, resulting in outstanding loans having shorter payback periods and higher annual repayment burden (Moramudali, 2024). This set the precedence for an impending financial crisis whilst all the signs were evident signaling an impending fall, the *Yahapalana* Coalition government (2015-2019) did not take sufficient steps to address it (Shauketaly, 2018).

In 2019, the coalition was defeated by overwhelming nationalistic force led by Gotabaya Rajapakse, the brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was the all-powerful defense

secretary during the height of the war. Instead of remedying or seeking ways to arrest the slide, Gotabaya Rajapakse regime (2019-2022) aggravated the crisis with drastic tax cuts slashing a sizable portion of government revenue (Afker, 2022). Gotabaya Rajapaksa attempted to champion a country wide experiment in radically altering approach to agriculture industry and practices by championing a fully-fledged organic farming policy. The policy not tested or timed pragmatically, unleashed a systemic crisis in the agricultural and food sectors, creating massive shortages of food supplies and with an added ban on chemical fertilizer affecting the domestic market and sending shockwaves (De Silva, 2022).

This debt accumulation was exacerbated by policy missteps and economic mismanagement, including substantial tax cuts and a sudden decision to limit fertilizer imports (De Silva, 2022; Raiser, 2023). According to World Bank estimates, in 2021 poverty (measured based on the US\$ 3.20/day) had increased by about half a million since January 2020. Real wages fell by 30-50 per cent in 2022 and remained stagnant (Athukorala & Wagle, 2022, p. 18). The rupee depreciated by about 40 percent (in dollar terms) between February and March 2022. Long queues for basic necessities became a routine feature of daily life. The acute shortage of fuel required for power generation led to prolonged power outages, with some areas experiencing over 12 hours of electricity cuts by late 2021. The healthcare sector also faced a significant crisis, as hospitals were forced to suspend non-emergency surgeries due to the depletion of essential imported medicines (De Silva, 2025, p. 198). The government's delayed policy response coupled with its initial reluctance to seek help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) compounded the situation, eventually forcing Sri Lanka to default on its debt in April 2022.

5. Easter Sunday Attacks and return of National Security Debate

With nearly a decade since the defeat of the separatist Tamil tiger movement, with Sri Lanka in the path for opening the country more and with inflows of tourism increasing On April 21st, 2019, within a span of 30 minutes, six coordinated suicide bombings were reported in various parts of Sri Lanka. The targets included three churches where Easter services were being held: including St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, and Zion Church in Batticaloa. Additionally, three luxury

hotels frequented by tourists from around the world - the Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand, and the Kingsbury - were targeted. The bombings left over 250 people dead, including at least 35 foreign nationals from USA, UK, and India (Barton, 2019).

The series of attacks had a significant impact on the country's security environment, political landscape, and economy. Public confidence in the government's ability to guarantee national security plummeted, prompting widespread criticism of political leaders and law enforcement authorities (New York Times, 2019). Politically, the attacks intensified existing divisions between the then-president and prime minister and their political parties - which were ruling as a coalition government - as either side attempted to shift blame on to the other (Sunday Times, 2020). The attacks served to further expose the weaknesses in the political edifice of the coalition government. The tourism sector was also hit particularly hard (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2019, p. 186). For example, in 2018 tourism which had contributed nearly 5% of the country's GDP and generated over 388,000 jobs dropped to 0.8%, with over 40,000 jobs lost by 2020 (Koop, 2022). Additionally, the exchange rate came under pressure in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, as foreign investors withdrew from the securities market (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020).

Sri Lanka's experiences with the April 2019 terrorist bombings and the April 2022 debt default underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive national security policy and assessment process. The country's national security approach, largely unchanged since the end of the civil war in 2009, has proven inadequate in addressing contemporary regional and international dynamics (Vidanage, 2024). These events revealed systemic failures in political decision making and strategic planning, which, if unaddressed, could lead to recurring crises. A robust national security framework is therefore essential, not only to mitigate such risks in the future but also to address the biases, groupthink, and communication failures that have compromised decision-making processes.

Sri Lanka's default on foreign debt in April 2022 provides another avenue to investigate the island's crisis decision-making. Historically, Sri Lanka relied heavily on concessionary loans from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, featuring extended payback periods, low interest rates, and favourable conditions (Wijesinha, 2012). However, as the country transitioned in 1997 to a lower

middle-income status (Wijewardena, 2018), access to concessional loans gradually diminished. This situation intensified in 2019 when Sri Lanka became an upper-middle income country (Warusavitarana, 2019). Consequently, the government turned to commercial loans and International Sovereign Bonds (ISBs), with shorter payback periods and higher interest rates to meet its expenses (Nicholas & Nicholas, 2023). The shift to commercial loans also had profound implications for Sri Lanka's economy. A drastic increase in central government debt-to-GDP ratio, the use of foreign loans for low return on investment projects, coupled with the lack of a clear vision to promote and diversify exports, resulted in heightened economic vulnerability – particularly during the Mahinda Rajapakse regime (2005-2015). The Gotabaya Rajapakse government's (2019-2022) utilization of foreign exchange reserves to meet debt obligations further compounded the economic strain, reducing reserves from \$7.6 billion in 2019 to just \$400 million by 2021 (World Bank, 2023).

While several economists have documented how decisions taken by the Gotabaya Rajapakse regime contributed to the crisis (Athukorala, 2024a; Chandrasekhar et al, 2023; Moramudali, 2024; Samarakoon, 2024; Weerakoon, 2020), scholarly literature has not examined whether decisionmakers were aware of the seriousness of Sri Lanka's economic situation or why the government adopted policies which exacerbated the crisis. Nicholas and Nicholas (2023) argue that the primary problem lies in Sri Lanka's international sovereign bond 'debt trap', which is a consequence of the country's failure to transition to an export-oriented manufacturing economy while Moramudali (2024), De Silva (2025) and Athukorala (2024b) place sizable blame on the imprudent economic policies adopted by the Gotabaya regime leading up to the default. They do not however, study why such policies were adopted at the time and whether policymakers understood the repercussions Sri Lanka would face if they adopted certain macroeconomic policies.

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) 2024 Article 4 consultation report and their Governance Diagnostic report (2023) discuss the repercussions Sri Lanka's economy faced because of certain decisions taken by the Gotabaya Rajapakse government. Even so, the IMF also did not investigate how key actors responded to critical intelligence prior to the default and the reasons why they adopted such

inappropriate policies. The economic crisis of Sri Lanka was elaborated to underscore the importance of the new transition in politics and the politico-economic implications of a national security strategy.

6. The Political Uprising of 2022 and rise of National Peoples Power

The citizens uprising in April 2022 concluded with the president relinquishing power and coming to an interim president taking over by July 2022. The unprecedented buildup of the *Aragalaya* and the decimation of a power bloc held by the Rajapaksa family was unthinkable, yet it became probably with the economic crisis, food shortages, fuel shortages, the shocks endured through covid 19 pandemic. All these together formed an gargantuan political vortex that sucked the nucleus of Rajapaksa power and the power of the traditional Sinhala Buddhist power block (Uyangoda 2025). The restoration of the political vacuum was powered by Sri Lankas most senior elder statesman Ranil Wickramasinghe.

The resurgence of multipolarity, characterized by strategic competition between major powers—particularly in the Indian Ocean, where Sri Lanka occupies a geographically pivotal location—along with the emergence of trade tensions, as major powers pursue divergent trade policies and implement protectionist measures, demands careful management of the island's foreign and security strategy to safeguard its sovereignty and autonomy. This geopolitical context, coupled with the recent rise of non-traditional security threats—such as climate change, cyberattacks, pandemics, and transnational organized crime—has added layers of complexity to national security planning.

Sri Lanka's radical shift in government formation came up in 2024 with a landslide win of the National Peoples Power (NPP) a political formation with less than half a decade of existence fused between a Marxist party and groups of left leaning but liberal activists and advocates. The political promise was change across the board and anti-corruption as the underlying driver. The Security narrative in the election campaigns was minimal and the leaders stayed away from geopolitical controversies. A year on, the country is facing extreme turbulence from a rapidly evolving global security environment and a regional complex.

The elaborate economic analysis of this paper reflected the primary challenge of economic balancing, economic recovery, structural changes and the existential threat of resumption of debt servicing and potential challenges. It is in this economic reality the importance of the national security strategy is elaborated. Sri Lanka and Japan share certain similar properties as two island nations at the opposite ends of the Indo Pacific, yet our political architecture, processes and practices differ. Yet the Japanese approach to drafting and publicising the National Security Strategy and core components of it is an important point of analysis for a Sri Lankan study.

Drawing aspiration from a developed and matured Asian Island nation which has a regional reach and has contributed to current security narratives especially to the functional framing of Free and Open Indo Pacific and to align its national security strategy allows Sri Lanka much inspiration and precedence to study, explore and learn from this Japanese experience of not just drafting a national security strategy but of situating it in the current security environment.

Since the end of war in Sri Lanka, number of attempts were made to articulate a written defence policy and a national security policy. Both these attempts which transpired as committees appointed by the respective heads of state resulted in comprehensive efforts to develop policy recommendations and outline Sri Lanka's security ambitions and the structural changes to existing military architecture. Whilst no publications are available outlining the processes, anecdotal evidence remain that have been shared by members of committees who has participated in these deliberations. The author refrains from sharing such anecdotes as there is no scientific approach to validate these narratives, or details, yet few common themes can be elucidated. The experiences showcased that political alignment dominated the committees, the preference was more towards achieving significant budget allocations for respective services with no real strategic assessment of the threat environment. Even in cases of such preliminary assessments were made, the analyses were based on a shopping list for respective services than taking a holistic approach to identify emerging threats and the threat landscape..

7. National Security Strategy and the Japanese experience

As the world transitions to a more dynamic multipolar order, these lessons from Sri Lanka's foreign policy remain profoundly relevant. The island's pragmatic approach to diplomacy, rooted in non-alignment and the pursuit of regional and global peace, offers a valuable template for navigating contemporary geopolitical challenges. Moving forward, Sri Lanka must build on this legacy of diplomacy to realize its national interests, implementing a foreign and defence policy that is dynamic enough to adapt to global changes and robust enough to enable the island to maintain its independence from power rivalries.

The strategic requirements of Sri Lanka and Japan, and the capabilities are incommensurable, yet the most applicable factor is the framing and key segmentations. Sri Lanka since the ending of the conflict in 2009 has gone through several rounds of drafting national security and defence strategies with lead role played by an array of committees, in the president secretariat, ministry of Defence and National Defence College. The challenge has been that the various iterations of this not coming into legislature and the inability to come up with a framework that is acceptable, pragmatic and is durable to its necessity and resilience enough to withstand change of political compositions.

The relationship between Sri Lanka and Japan is unique and special. It is special due to the circumstances that led to Japan's deep engagement and facilitation of development assistance and its continuing Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). The strategic context of the timing that this article is being developed lies on the rapid transformation of the strategic environment in Asia and the world in general. Since the return of geopolitical compulsions mainly driven by the increasing prominence of China and roles played by so called revisionist states such as Russia, Iran and North Korea (Mead) and the pursuit of strategic autonomy of India has clear implications for regional stability and security.

Small states in regions that have weaker regional architectures and powerful regional neighbours who are intimidated by the multiple moves of both adversaries and unpredictable nature of friends, make it extremely difficult in making policy choices. Shivhankar Menon, the former NSA of India and Secretary External Affairs, in his famous publication, CHOICES, published in 2016 argues, 'In effect, Sri Lanka is an aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast. This is the perpetual dilemma

of India's Sri Lanka policy: we must engage in order to defend our interests in keeping Sri Lanka free of antagonistic outside influence.' Menon (2016:143).

Japan and Sri Lanka both in security Lense of great or regional powers has been bestowed with the aircraft carrier analogy, it is an important indication of strategic significance of the two countries and the strategic vulnerabilities that are inherent with such policy observations. Security is not about making policy choices. It is about being transparent and responsible to your own public about the decisions that made in the name of national security. Posen (2025) argues, Japan agreed to serve as the United States' floating aircraft carrier on the frontline with China, and its garrisons'.

Japan and Sri Lanka have been endowed with a strategic analogy as being permanently parked aircraft carriers. The former by necessity and the later by geographic fatality. When this role is strategically identified the national security mechanisms in both countries must acknowledge its strategic relevance to external powers.

This is consistently highlighted by Sri Lankan policy makers at the highest level two important observations stand out one in 2022 from former President Ranil Wickramasinghe in his speech on graduation of first batch of candidates from newly established National Defence College (NDC) in Sri Lanka. NDC Sri Lanka was another effort in creating capacity in Sri Lanka to generate new security thinking and advancement among its senior security and defence leaders. Addressing the gathering President said '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.' (2022). Any Sri Lanka security strategy has to make India as quintessential external component. In 2025, in her first state visit to India, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya made a strong statement as she claimed 'Sri Lanka has consistently upheld a sovereign pledge—"never to permit" her soil to be used in a manner that threatens the security of India, and this principle remains "sacrosanct" (2025). Thus, any policy document needs to underscore the strategic depth of the India-Sri Lanka relationship which Sri Lanka's future security interests and machinations will much depend upon.

The lesson for Sri Lanka in framing a national security strategy and drawing inspiration from Japan is not just about FOIP or Japan's complex security relations. It is that Japan is a success story because of its maritime outlook that security thinking was hugely influenced and leading to a successful economy. As Paine (2025) points out, Japan returned to a maritime paradigm of working through international organizations and under international law. This produced the Japanese economic miracle, in which a ruined country quickly became one of the world's richest.

Multiple analyses of the Global South increasingly point to with concern, the growing tendency for regional and international institutions to become tools for advancing the strategic, economic, and political interests of major powers. This often comes at the expense of smaller and developing nations, whose voices and priorities are sidelined in decision-making processes. Such trends undermine the core objectives of international institutions, which are meant to serve as neutral platforms for cooperation, mediate disputes, and protect global public goods, including maritime security and safety, climate stability, and fair economic development. Challenges in domains such as maritime governance, climate change mitigation, and cyber regulations and global pandemics such as Covid-19 require coordinated global responses. If the institutions and multilateral frameworks designed to address issues that arise in these domains fail to act in the interests of all nations, they risk losing both their efficacy, and overtime, legitimacy. Sri Lanka has consistently advocated for reforms. It is considered as necessary to enhance the accountability and inclusiveness of international institutions and believes that further measures need to be adopted to address these challenges. Sri Lanka must in lieu of the above, and prepare itself to mitigate, navigate and negotiate such external currents to introduce a robust and accepted National Security Strategy.

8. Conclusion

Rosata and Measheimer (2023) brings in an extensive set of cases from 20th century to argue for the case of rational thinking and the non-rational moments of state decision making based on the strategic intent of survival. Sri Lanka's strategic decision making in the grander aspects cannot be framed using

the context of big power rivalries. The need to adopt rational strategic thinking when it comes to national security is a necessity for the island nation to survive and thrive in the volatile security environment it is fated to be in. Thus, the article traced the key challenges of the last decade yet outlined the necessity of articulating a national security strategy to achieve stability, domestically and regionally, and the need to be sensitive to global currents. Sri Lanka has stood for order and law when it comes to the Indian ocean, and Japan's experience provides valuable insights to shaping Sri Lanka's policy frameworks.

Whilst there are commonalities between the two, there are points of divergence and policy sensitivity, which must be factored in designing Sri Lanka's national security initiatives. Former President Ranil Wickramasinghe is his much-touted NDC address as referred to earlier in this article which became at that time the de facto security and defence policy statement for Sri Lanka. He emphasizes, '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.' (2022). The incumbent regime has significant deviations and the mandate for it from most pre-NPP administrations. As flagged above, they seem to be moving into a pragmatism in the context of security as reflected on Prime Minister Amarasuriyas recent statements in Delhi, which are in sync with President Wickramasinghe. This sense of strategic pragmatism will enable Sri Lanka's persistent structural disability to work towards a multi partisan and objective national security strategy for stability and progress.

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