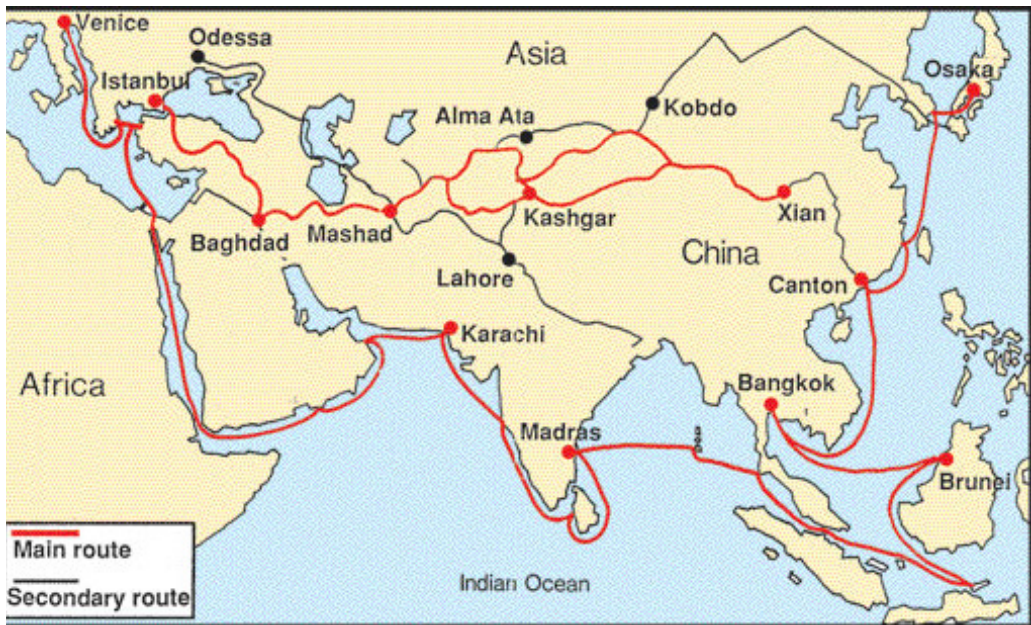


THE EARLY DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS OF SRI LANKA AND THEIR IMPACT ON SRI LANKA

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The goal of Sri Lankan foreign policy at present is to maintain a strong, independent, powerful and united Sri Lanka. When studying early diplomatic relations still this statement is true to some extent. Even this was true to the core when studying colonial period.

Sri Lanka recognised as a sovereign state from early times. It had diplomatic relations with several foreign kingdoms. According to historians Sri Lanka had diplomatic and trade relations with the major civilisations of the world. Though India is Sri Lanka's neighbour, because of ethnic problem some historians refrain from talking on diplomatic relations especially with South India.

When studying Sri Lankan history The Deepawamsa written in 4 AD and the Mahavamsa, written by Mahanama Thero in 5 AD, trace the origins of the Sinhalese to the regions of Northern and Eastern India inhabited in ancient times by Aryan people¹. Evidence to back this claim includes not only their language, which is related to the languages of Northern India including Sanskrit. The Mahavamsa depicts the history of Sri Lanka as a bitter struggle between the Sinhalese and intruders from the Indian mainland². We had writing even before introduction of Buddhism in 3rd BC. Even during Stone Age, Iron Age and during new Stone Age it was there. Though researches were done, it was not mentioned. Both Buddhism and Vijaya came from North India, Aryan invasion and migrations. Even before that we have reasons to believe that there were migrations from South India. However in most literature it was referred as Tamil invasions. This is totally false as South Indian rulers were Aryans by then. As per South Indian historians Aryans came from Yurals or from East Africa to North India and later came to South India. Dravidians were living in India even before the arrival of Aryans.

1 countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/58.html

2 mahavamsa.org

In Mahawamsa no references were given to king Ravana, one of the greatest kings of Sri Lanka ever had. Reason behind that could well be the fact that story of Ravana was based on book Ramayanaya, by Walmikee, book of Indian origin. Mahanama there may not have known about book by the time he wrote Mahawamsa.

Sri Lanka enjoys a unique geographical location which is a combination of three vital geopolitical dimensions: its contiguity to the Indian subcontinent from where successive waves of civilisations have emanated, its equidistant position between East Asia and East Africa which has enabled it to bestride that region, and its situation astride the sea lanes linking East and West which has made it the true meeting ground between East and West. That configuration of circumstances continues to this day and is the cornerstone of Sri Lanka's international reputation. The wide arc of the region thus became an area of influence for Sri Lanka.

In the maritime sphere, Sri Lanka had extensive foreign contacts which included imperial Rome, the Hellenistic Kingdoms, the Court of Axum in the Horn of Africa, the Sassanid Kingdom in Persia, the Byzantine Empire on the Western side and the Maritime Empire of Sri Vijaya, Egypt, and the Arab world, China, the Kingdoms of Siam, Cambodia and Myanmar on the eastern side³.

As per the existing literature Sri Lanka's introduction to international diplomacy occurred in epic circumstances when a momentous link was established in the 3rd Century BC between the mighty Indian Emperor Asoka of the Mauryan Dynasty and his Sri Lankan contemporary, King Devanampiyatissa of Anuradhapura through the medium of the Emperor's two personal emissaries, his son and daughter, Mahinda and Sanghamitta who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Buddhism thus became the premier faith in Sri Lanka. In due course, Sri Lanka became the second home of Buddhism from where it was carried to other countries. In fact, Buddhism became an impetus and an inspiration in the foreign policy of Sri Lanka.

The first recorded encounter between Rome and Sri Lanka took place during the reign of Roman emperor Claudius (41-54 AD). Pliny says that a Roman collector of Red Sea dues under Emperor Claudius was stranded in Sri Lanka. On his return, he was accompanied by four envoys sent by the Sri Lankan king to the Roman emperor⁴. In Rome they had talked of travel and discussed the position of the star Canopus in the Mediterranean sky. Canopus is the star which guided the ships navigated in the Indian Ocean.

An embassy from Sri Lanka was said to have been received by Roman emperor Julian in 361 AD. Palladius writing in the 5th Century said that the Sri Lankan king was a very powerful monarch. Coins of Byzantine rulers up to Heraclitus (613-641 AD) have been found in Sri Lanka.

There had been diplomatic relations with Persia. Several Arab records speak of an embassy sent to Iranian king Khusraw I (Anusharwan), 531-78 AD. Anusharwan's rule extended over six Sinhala kings. One record says the Sri Lankan king sent ten elephants, two hundred thousand pieces of teak wood and seven pearl divers to the king⁵.

Sri Lanka was known to many countries in ancient and medieval times. It pursued an active foreign policy and established links with many foreign countries. Sri Lanka is mentioned in Greek and Roman writings dating from the third century BC. Sri Lanka was included in the map of Asia, drawn in 150 AD by Ptolemy. The first recorded encounter between Rome and Sri Lanka took place during the reign of Claudius (41-54 AD) in Rome. Pliny has described the event. A Roman merchant had been shipwrecked in Sri Lanka. On his return to Rome, he took with him four ambassadors of the Sinhala king. However, there had been contact even before that. The Mahavamsa states that Bhatika Abhaya (BC 22 to 7 AD) had sent an embassy to Rome and got down coral for a net to be cast over the Maha Thupa.

3 www.mea.gov.lk/index.php/en/foreign-policy/historical-context 2013

4 www.island.lk/2008/05/03/satmag6.html

5 www.island.lk/2008/05/03/satmag6.html

Sri Lanka had trade links with Central Asian kingdoms such as Bactria and Gandhara. These are now a part of Afghanistan. Gandhara had trade connections with Sri Lanka in the 1st Century AD. Coins from Bactria have been found in Ruhuna.

Three inscriptions from Koravakgala at Situlpahuwa in the Hambantota district contain the word 'Kaboja'. The Kambojas were a native population in the western part of the Mauryan Empire speaking a language of Iranian origin. Persia (now Iran) was India's neighbour at this time. Persia's other boundary www.island.lk/2008/05/03/satmag6.html ended at the Mediterranean Sea. The Western trade was controlled by Persia. Sri Lanka had trade links with it.

Sri Lanka paid attention to diplomatic relations that would enhance external trade. Buvanekabahu (1272-1284) sent away an embassy from Yemen saying that he wanted diplomatic contacts with Egypt. His embassy to Egypt sailed up the Persian Gulf to Baghdad and was received in Cairo in April 1283. He wanted direct trade with Egypt and indicated the products he could supply. However since he was trading with Yemen he had wanted to have an envoy in Aden, too.

India and China are emerging as the dominant economic and political powers of the 21st Century. It is therefore relevant to note that Sri Lanka had good relations with North India and China in the pre-modern period. Dr Vernon Mendis who studied Sri Lankan history in depth commented that India, China and Sri Lanka were the three foremost civilisations in Asia at this time. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh were originally a part of North India. Eastern Afghanistan for example was considered politically and culturally as a part of North-Western India.

The relationship with China was unique. That may be the reason why some of Sigiriya's well-endowed women have Chinese and Mongolian features. It extended for five Centuries AC, from the 5th to the 10th and featured approximately sixteen delegations from Sri Lanka to the Imperial Court. However Dr Mahinda Weragamage who has studied Sri Lankan and Chinese relations in depth, states that even during 1st Century AD relations were established as per the records held in China. This is contrary to the belief mainly by historians like Dr Vernon Mendis as stated earlier. Sri Lanka utilised its strategic location as a half-way house to become an entrepot and an emporium in the maritime life of the region. Sri Lanka thereby became virtually the commercial hub of the region. This is borne out by the wealth of commercial artefacts of different origins found in the Island, and the places where they were discovered, which reveal the existence of several ports on the coast line of Sri Lanka. Further testimony to the ancient maritime connections of Sri Lanka come from the number of names by which the Island was known, the abundance of references to it in the travel literature of the time, the number of famous travellers it attracted, all of which justify Tenant's description of Sri Lanka as one of the best known islands in that time. With the rise of Islam, Sri Lanka became a base for Arab trading activities in the region.

The Sri Lankan kings communicated with the Chinese emperors. Mahanama Thero (406-428) wrote a letter to the Chinese emperor. The letter indicated that the Sri Lanka king was well aware of developments in China. Dhatusena had sent a letter to the Chinese king around 456 AD. Kumara Dhatusena (508-516) had sent a message to the Chinese king on his coronation, and said he would love to visit China.

There were numerous diplomatic missions to China dating from the time of King Gajabahu I (114-136). There were six recorded missions in between 618-905, of which four were during the time of Aggabodhi VI (733-772). Envoys were sent regularly to China in 13th and 14th Centuries. Chinese records indicate that China offered to help the Sri Lankan king get back the tooth relic when in 1284 Pandya king Maravarman Kulasekhara (1268-1310) got hold of it. Between 1273 and 1294, there were five missions. Parakrama bahu VI (1412- 1467) dispatched six missions. Kavyasekera says that there were Chinese soldiers in the army of Parakramabahu III (1287-1293). China has shown respect for Sri Lanka. When Cheng Ho, an envoy of the Chinese emperor was attacked in Sri Lanka, in the 15th Century, China took a lenient view. Instead of beheading the Sri Lankan offenders, who were taken to China, they sent them back with food and clothes. It was said that since they were Buddhists they were pardoned.

The greatest bond between China and Sri Lanka was that of Buddhism. Mahanama Thero in his message to the Chinese emperor said that a government based on Buddhist principles is the ideal government and said that the bond of friendship between the two countries was based on their adherence to the Triple Gem. Silakala (518-531) in his message to China said that despite the great distance between Sri Lanka and China, there was awareness in Sri Lanka regarding the developments in China .⁶

Sri Lanka was one of the first states in Asia to initiate relations with China. Dr Vernon Mendis says that this reflects very creditably on the stature and outlook of Sri Lanka. The first reference to an embassy from Sri Lanka to China can be dated to the time of Gajabahu I (114-136). The next recorded visit as found in Chinese sources is a mission during the time of Upatissa I arriving in China in 414 AD. From the 9th to the 12th centuries, there is one solitary recorded mission from Mahinda V in 989 AD.

The missions picked up again thereafter. Between 1273 and 1294, there were five missions. Parakramabahu VI (1412-1467) dispatched six missions between 1416 and 1459. No other king had sent so many missions. More than one ambassador had been dispatched during this period.

There were close trade relations between Sri Lanka and China. There are records of Sri Lankan ships in China in the 8th Century. Chinese coins belonging to every emperor from 976 AD to 1265 AD have been found in Sri Lanka. Historian Dr Mahinda Werake suggests that some of the ambassadors may have been merchants who were involved in Sino-Sri Lanka trade. The goodwill of the Chinese emperor was necessary to conduct trade smoothly. Chinese sources referred to missions from foreign countries as 'tribute missions' since the Chinese looked down on all other countries.

Southeast Asia started to develop stable kingdoms only in the medieval period. Vijayabahu I (1055-1110) initiated diplomatic relations with King Anauratha (1044- 1077) of Myanmar (Burma). The two countries also exchanged envoys. Vijayabahu sought Anauratha's help in the war against the Cholas. Anauratha responded with economic aid. He sent a shipload of goods. Vijayabahu I sent relics to the Burmese king. He obtained Buddhist ordination from Myanmar in order to re-establish the sangha after the Chola occupation.

Parakramabahu (1153-1186) kept up the link. In 1167, Ven. Panthagu, the Sangharaja of Myanmar sought refuge in Sri Lanka and stayed for six years. He had left Burma in disgust because king Narathu had poisoned his elder brother who was the legitimate heir to the throne. Nissankamalla (1187-1196) sent relics to Myanmar.

Vijayabahu II (1186-1187) had friendly relations with the Burmese king. He had written him a letter in Pali. King Narapati of Ava (1433-1469) sent offerings of gold and precious stones to the Tooth relic and bought some land in Sri Lanka to provide accommodation for Burmese monks visiting Sri Lanka. His successor King Thihathura (1469-1481) and his queen made a broom using their hair, studded its handle with gems, and sent it to sweep the floor of the tooth relic temple in Kotte. There were diplomatic links with Thailand. Records indicate that King Indraditya of Sukhodaya (now a part of Thailand) communicated with Parakrama bahu II (1236- 1270). Sri Lanka also had diplomatic relations with Cambodia. A Sinhalese princess was sent to Cambodia during the time of Parakramabahu I. An inscription of Nissanka malla shows that he was friendly with Cambodia. The son of Cambodian king Jayavarman VII. (1181-1219.) studied Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Diplomacy was linked to trade. During the 11th and 12th Centuries, Cambodia played an important part in the regional trade of Southeast Asia. Burma and Cambodia were rivals in trade.

Sri Lanka's knowledge of foreign kingdoms seemed to have expanded as time went on. Dambadeni asna which deals with the life of Parakramabahu II (1302-1326) mentions sixty countries. Parakumba sirita, written on Parakramabahu VI (1470-1478) also refers to many countries, including 'Hingula'. This is considered to be Korea since in Korean language it was known as Hangul.

Religion has defined Sinhalese identity over the centuries far more than race. Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka around the third century B.C. by missionaries sent by Indian emperor Asoka and was fervently adopted by the Sinhalese king, Devanampiya Tissa. The Theravada school of Buddhism was established af-

ter a great council of monks and scholars was held on Sri Lanka in 88-77 B.C. to codify the Pali scriptures.

The faith was later transmitted by Sri Lankan monks to Southeast Asian countries such as Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Sri Lanka's links with India continued to grow, initially with the North but with the emergence of South Indian kingdoms in the latter half of the first millennium, the centre of gravity in Sri Lanka's relations with India shifted to the South. Sri Lanka became embroiled in the power politics of Southern India. After standing up to successive threats through adroit bilateralism for two Centuries, the Anuradhapura kingdom finally succumbed to the Chola Empire. Although Anuradhapura liberated itself in due course, the South Indian kingdoms of Pandya and Vijayanagara continued to be threats, which led to the downfall of the Sri Lankan kingdoms.

The Sri Lankan kings have been very selective in his contact with Indian kingdoms. They seem to have selected only the most powerful or the most useful of the Indian kingdoms. North India had two powerful empires, Maurya (321- 185 BC) and Gupta (320- 510 AD). The Sri Lankan kings were in touch with the best of the Maurya and Gupta kings. Devanampiyatissa sent an embassy to king Dharmasoka, the greatest of the Maurya kings. Sri Meghavanna (301-328) contacted king Samudragupta. Samudragupta was the greatest of the Gupta kings. The embassy to Samudragupta is mentioned in a Chinese account.

The Sri Lanka king was recognised by North India. North India, during this period, included Pakistan, Bangladesh and a good part of today's Afghanistan. Devanampiyatissa (BC 250-210) sent an embassy to King Dharmasoka. The mission left from Jambukola near Point Pedro and arrived at Pataliputra via Tamluk in Bengal. Dharmasoka in return sent the items needed for the consecration of a king. The Sinhala King Kithsirimevan (301-328 AD) had sent a mission to the North Indian king Samudragupta, stating that he wished to build a rest house and monastery for pilgrims visiting Buddha Gaya. Centuries later, the Rajput mercenaries brought in by the General Mitta to depose King Bhuvaneka Bahu I (1272-1284) sided with the king and the rebellion failed.

The Sri Lankan kings were very selective in South India as well. The Sinhala dynasty had friendly relations with the greatest of the Pallava kings, Narasimhavarman I, also known as Mahamalla. (630-668). The Pallava dynasty had North Indian connections. The Sinhala kings also had friendly relations with the kings of Kalinga (Orissa). Vijayabahu I had links with Orissa and Karnataka. He sent offerings to Mahabodhi at Buddha Gaya. Nissankamalla entered into friendly relations with Mysore, Nellore, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra and Gujarat. Vijayabahu IV (1270-1272) had Rajput mercenaries. They refused to fight against Bhuvaneka bahu I saying he was the legitimate successor.⁷

Relations with South India were quite different. The two kingdoms meddled in each other's affairs. South India supplied mercenaries for several Sinhala kings who needed to fight for the throne. The Pallava king Narasinha Varman I, supplied King Manavamma, (684-718) with an army to challenge the ruling king, Dathopatisa II. Manavamma's son, Mahinda I (730-733 AD) was born in India. Lokesvara (1210-1211) also went to India and returned with a Tamil army.

However, there were also marriage links with South India. Queen Lilavati belonged to the Pandya line on her father's side. Vijayabahu I gave his sister in marriage to a Pandya prince, in preference to a Chola prince. Some historians believe this was done in order to evade an invasion. There were trade and diplomatic links too. Parakramabahu I actively encouraged trade with South India. In his Nainativu inscription written in Tamil, he said that foreign merchants were welcome, and were assured of protection. The Sinhala king did not stick only to the eastern side of India. Vijayabahu I exchanged envoys and gifts with the Kannata, (Western Chalukya) king. The Chalukya region was in western India.

The Pandyas, Pallavas and Cholas of South India, were equally matched in political and military strength. There were continuous conflicts between them as they battled for supremacy in South India. Their power struggles overflowed into Sri Lanka. The Sinhala king usually sided with the Pandya kings against the Chola king. Kassapa V (14-23 AD) sent troops to fight on behalf of the Pandya king against the Chola king. Mahinda IV (956-72) had a successful campaign in India against the

Chola king. Rajasimha Pandya fled to Ceylon with crown jewels during the reign of Dappula IV.

Sri Lanka underwent several periods of South Indian rule. South Indian rulers, as incorrectly mentioned in certain literature as Tamil chiefs, ruled in Sri Lanka in the 1st and 2nd Century BC. The specific periods are BC 103-89 and BC 48-44. There was a period of Pandya rule in the 5th Century between 429-455. The Cholas occupied the Rajarata, from 1017 to 1070 AD. They captured Mahinda V and took him to India. Then came Magha of Kerala who ruled parts of the Rajarata from 1215 to 1232. Sri Lanka was also subjected to several short lived invasions from South India. The Cholas invaded during the time of King Kalyanavati (1202-1208), Anikanda (1209), Lokesvara (1210-1211) and Lilavati (1197-1212). Jatavarman Sundara Pandya invaded around 1258. There was another Pandya invasion under Ariyachakravarti, around 1286. The bowl and tooth relic were taken away. Parakramabahu III (1287-1293) had to negotiate with King Kulasekhara to get it back.

Sri Lanka had diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries. They started to develop into sovereign kingdoms well after the 5th Century. Sri Lanka established kinship relations with the Sri Vijaya kingdom. Mahinda IV (956-972) married a Kalinga princess. So did Vijayabahu I (1055-1110). A succession of kings of pure Kalinga descent followed, starting with Nissanka Malla, (1187-1196). The Sri Vijaya kingdom, consisted of Java, Sumatra and a section of the Malay peninsula. It dated from the 5th Century. It possessed immense sea power, having formidable naval strength. It dominated the Straits of Malacca and policed these waters against piracy. Sri Vijaya's only competitor in the Indian Ocean was the Cholas. Since South India was under Chola control, the Sinhala kings would have considered it advisable to establish links with Sri Vijaya.

Sri Lanka, Burma and Cambodia were engaged in trade in the Bay of Bengal area by the 7th Century. Burma and Cambodia were rivals in trade. Sri Lanka had trade and diplomatic relations with both countries. Vijayabahu I (1055-1110) initiated the link with Burma. This was continued by Parakramabahu I and Vijayabahu II. Sri Lanka and Burma maintained envoys in each other's countries. There is some evidence of diplomatic contact with Cambodia too. A Sinhalese princess was sent to Cambodia during the time of Parakramabahu I and an inscription of Nissankamalla shows that he was friendly with Cambodia.

The Sinhala king was aware of the rise of Islam. Aggabodhi III (628-639) had sent a goodwill mission to Prophet Mohammed at Medina. The Prophet had died by the time the mission got there. On the way back, the king's messenger also died. It was left to the servant to convey information to the king. This information is contained in the writings of the 10th Century Iranian navigator, Ibn Shahrer.⁸ The Muslim writer Al-Biladuri stated that in the 8th Century the Sinhala king had sent to the Caliph the orphaned daughters of Arab merchants who had died in the island.⁹

Sri Lanka fought several wars. Sri Vallabha, the Pandya king, invaded Sri Lanka during the time of Sena I (833-853). He sacked parts of it, looted its valuables and went back. Sri Vallabha's son, rebelled against the father, and sought the assistance of Sena II (853-887).¹⁰ The Sinhala army entered South India, captured Madhura, placed the son on the throne as Varaguna II and returned with the valuables taken by the father, as well as some of the Pandya valuables.¹¹ On an appeal from Parakrama Pandya, Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) sent an army under commander Lankapura to fight King Kulasekera. The army took Madhura, and got ready to crown Vira Pandya, the son of Parakrama Pandya. After a protracted battle The Muslim writer Al-Biladuri stated that in the 8th Century the Sinhala king had sent to the Caliph the orphaned daughters of Arab merchants who had died in the island. Atle Kulasekera defeated Lankapura and beheaded him. Undeterred, Parakramabahu got ready to invade again. An inscription says that Parakramabahu was building ships and assembling troops at various ports to make a fresh invasion of South India. The Chola king stopped this by sending an expedition which destroyed the preparations, set fire to the land, killed some Sinhalese chieftains and took others prisoner. The letters Parakramabahu sent to King Kulasekera were intercepted.

8 www.island.lk/2008/05/31/satmag5.html

9 www.srilankaguardian.org/2008_03_18_archive.html

10 www.island.lk/2006/03/18/satmag1.html

11 University of Ceylon History of Ceylon p. 487-506

Historians think that Parakramabahu's wars against the Cholas may have helped the eventual collapse of the Cholas. Parakramabahu I supported any Pandya who was prepared to go to war against the Cholas. Nissankamalla (1187-1196) also invaded South India. The invasion was probably successful as it was mentioned that the king had listened to music and dancing.¹²

The last recorded invasion is that of Parakramabahu VI (1412-1467) who invaded a port in Tanjore because Sinhala traders had been humiliated there.

According to the Culavamsa, the Burmese king, Alaungsithu, had over a period of time shown antagonism to Sri Lanka. He had captured a Sinhala princess who was on her way to Cambodia. He had also ill-treated the Sinhala envoys and created difficulties for the Sinhala merchants in Burma, particularly about the export of elephants. So Parakramabahu I invaded Burma at Pegu in 1164.

The invasion was successful and the troops returned to Sri Lanka. There may have been trade rivalry between Cambodia, Burma and Sri Lanka. Parakramabahu's expedition to Burma shows that he was able to intervene and give protection to the Sinhala merchants.

Sri Lanka also took on China. Cheng Ho (1371-1433) a Muslim of Arab-Mongol origin was the imperial envoy and Admiral of the Chinese fleet with 18 mighty ships. He made several voyages in the Indian Ocean and organised stopovers in Sri Lanka on several occasions. On his visit to Sri Lanka in 1411, he was challenged by Vira Alakesvara, who was ruling at Raigama at the time. Alakesvara had planned to lure Cheng Ho into the interior and ambush him. It was a clever strategy. But his plans were leaked to the enemy by his own people and this helped Cheng Ho. The battle raged for six days. Finally Alakesvara, his wife, children, and officers of his court were captured and taken prisoner to the Imperial court in Beijing. The Chinese emperor treated them well. He told them to select someone else as king and sent the whole lot back. The description given of this event in the Rajavaliya is supported by Chinese sources.

A new chapter in the history of Sri Lanka began with the arrival of European powers in Asia, notably the Portuguese and the Dutch, beginning from the 15th Century. Their quest for political and commercial footholds in the Island resulted in intermittent conflicts with local kingdoms.

The goal of Sri Lanka foreign policy at present is to maintain a strong, independent, powerful and united Sri Lanka. When studying early diplomatic relations still this statement is true to some extent. When South or North Indian invaders were strong, as a second measure when war is not the answer, Sri Lankan rulers tend to strike a balance either with being friendly with enemies rival or by accepting him within limits. This is how marriages from Indian sub-continent came to force. Even this was true to the core when studying colonial period.

As per new researches being carried out, extensive relationship between China and Sri Lanka dated back 1st Century unearthed. That is contrary to only available literature source Mahawamsa which gives accounts from 5th Century onward. However as discussed during paper, considering the fact that Mahawamsa has no references to Ramayanaya or king Ravana one of the greatest kings we ever had, it can be assumed that unrecorded history prevails even before 5th Century BC.

Sri Lanka has the distinction of being one of the few modern States which has remained a distinct sovereign entity for over 2000 years. It can also justifiably claim to have distinguished itself in the realm of international affairs for much of that time.

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Commander(GSP)Kaththirachchi

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