

# Sri Lanka, Fight or Flight From International Organisations: In the Footsteps of US President Trump?

By [Tamara Kunanayakam](#)

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*Speaking at the National War Heroes Commemoration Ceremony on 19 May 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared that he will not hesitate to withdraw Sri Lanka from any international body or organisation that continuously targets the country and war heroes.*

The President was probably referring to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council, given that they are the only international entities that Sri Lanka belongs to, which have systematically targeted the country and its armed forces.

The statement has received wide publicity in the international media and can boomerang back on Sri Lanka at a time it desperately needs international support, precisely to protect its war heroes.

The United Nations is an obstacle to US hegemony, but Sri Lanka cannot survive without it.

The intention of this author is not to echo the detractors of Sri Lanka, whose object it is to undermine the country's sovereignty. On the contrary, it seeks to highlight the dangers of a policy of withdrawal from an international organisation that, under the existing international order, is the ultimate guarantor of that sovereignty.

Withdrawal from what?

What does the President mean by withdrawal? Sri Lanka is not a Member of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) it is only an Observer State, so the question of withdrawal as Council Member doesn't arise. The only way to completely withdraw from the Council would be to withdraw from the United Nations, altogether, the Council being a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly. The same is true for withdrawal from OHCHR, which is a body of the United Nations..

If that is the intention, it is preposterous that Sri Lanka should even be contemplating it. The United Nations is the only multilateral organisation that exists today capable of defending the interests of less powerful states such as ours. Whatever its weaknesses - and there are many, the world order established under the UN Charter is based on respect for the principle of sovereign equality in relations between states - big or small, and stands firmly opposed to foreign domination and hegemony, external intervention and interference in the internal affairs of states, foreign aggression, and wars.

A shift from non alignment to 'neutrality', from international cooperation to isolation?

Does this statement foreshadow a shift from Sri Lanka's traditional position of non alignment in international relations?

The President of Sri Lanka and his close associates, among them Rohan Gunaratna, whom the Indian online paper AsianAge refers to as his key advisor, have referred on several occasions to a shift in foreign policy, from Non Alignment to Neutrality. On 26 June 2019 AsianAge reported Gunaratna, who had been tasked to open a back channel with India's President Modi, as having said that the newly elected President was committed to "*pursuing the concept of neutrality*". More ominously, he is quoted as saying Sri Lanka "*will declare itself a neutral state by enshrining the principle of neutrality in the constitution.*"

'Neutrality' is a negative stance adopted only in time of war. In peacetime, like 'withdrawal', it is synonymous with isolation. It does not require the definition of principles that are necessary to guide international relations between states, resulting in opportunism and chaos, with the strong always winning.

The Non-Alignment Movement does not define itself negatively in terms of an alliance against Great Powers, but in favour of international cooperation and solidarity to protect and defend the hard won freedom and independence of developing nations by measures to consolidate their political independence through economic independence, and to prevent a return to foreign domination. It is not isolationist, non alignment applying only to Great Powers actually engaged in war.

Unlike neutrality, non alignment has clearly defined principles on which international cooperation must be based, as reflected in the 1955 Bandung Principles, which include, *inter alia*, sovereignty, justice and equality, independence, territorial integrity, non interference, non intervention, non aggression, and multilateralism. These principles were subsequently incorporated into the UN General Assembly's 1970 Friendly Relations Declaration, which is the only authoritative document further developing the principles embodied in the UN Charter so that it reflected the concerns of newly independent states.

Withdrawal from international organisations is a policy that is consistent with the concept of neutrality, rather than non alignment.

The power US wields over lesser States, is the power it is allowed to wield

If the systematic attacks against Sri Lanka and its war heroes are to be countered, then the first step is to recognise that at their source is the United States and certain Western allies, and not the United Nations. Such an admission, however, will require the kind of political courage and political will that successive governments in Sri Lanka have tragically lacked.

The United Nations does not belong to the US, but to all 193 Member States, as sovereign equals. The power that the US wields over lesser States, is the power it is allowed to wield by those same lesser States. That is how the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights came to be hijacked to serve America's hegemonic ambitions and its vision of a world order based on unilateralism. And, all the time, countries like Sri Lanka looked the other way or even collaborated in digging their own graves.

Sri Lanka, a tale of resistance and a tale of betrayal

Washington's success in pushing through anti-Sri Lanka resolutions have less to do with the

brute force of the United States than the failure of Sri Lankan governments to mobilise sufficient support from developing countries, from within the Non Aligned Movement, its natural allies. Past experience, positive and negative, bears this out.

In September 2011, the United States and Canada were forced to withdraw a draft resolution that would have placed Sri Lanka on the Council's agenda when a majority of developing countries publicly declared they would vote against it. On that occasion, Sri Lanka had taken the initiative, together with a group of like-minded countries, to move a draft resolution on the independence of OHCHR.

In October 2015, the tale was different – and Sri Lanka lost. This time it was the Yahapalana Government that came to the aid of the US by co-sponsoring the infamous resolution 30/1, forcing a consensus on all those developing countries that would otherwise have voted against a precedent-setting resolution that they knew could be utilised against them. Sri Lanka's political leadership thus contributed in no small measure to not only undermining its own sovereignty, but the sovereignty of other developing countries, and weakening the multilateral system, ultimate guarantor of its existence.

War against LTTE terror and separatism, a war for multilateralism

It is, indeed, incongruous and ironical that the President's statement on withdrawal was made at an event organised to pay tribute to war heroes who sacrificed their lives in the war against LTTE terror and separatism, a war fought precisely to defend the principles that unilateralism opposes.

It should be evident by now to decision-makers that it is in the country's best interest to strengthen, not weaken the multilateral system based on the UN Charter, especially with the increasing resort by the US and its Western allies to utilise unilateral coercive measures as a means of exerting pressure on sovereign states to compel policy changes through sanctions or threats of sanctions, embargoes, blockades, conditionalities, trade wars, and intimidation. COVID-19 has revealed the vilest of methods used by the US to obtain masks, protective equipment, and the right to own vaccines developed by other states, including against its own European allies, Germany and France.

Withdrawal and isolation will strengthen US unilateralism and global hegemony

Withdrawal from the United Nations will only strengthen the US unilateralist vision and advance its hegemonic ambitions, undermining multilateralism, which the Non Aligned Movement has largely contributed to developing.

The ultimate result of withdrawal will be further isolation of Sri Lanka, weakening its ability to negotiate from a position of strength, depriving it of the means to resolve problems with global dimensions, such as COVID 19, climate change, trade, and finance, and eroding its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, ideals for which Sri Lanka's war heroes sacrificed their lives.

Sri Lanka's message to the world – The Trump way or Sri Lanka's way

And how will such a statement be interpreted by our potential allies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whose very existence as independent nations depends on respect for the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and at a time that US President Donald Trump has made a similar threat to quit the World Health Organisation in the midst of a global health

pandemic?

How can withdrawal from international organisations be reconciled with the urgent task at hand to win back allies and bridge the gulf that resolution 30/1 has created between Sri Lanka and other developing countries with which it has a shared history, common concerns, and mutual interests?

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*Tamara Kunanayakam is former Ambassador/ Permanent Representative to the UN at Geneva, and Ex Chairperson of the UN Working Group on the Right to Development.*

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