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Pirapaharan, Chapter 14

JR's Three Track Policy

by **T. Sabaratnam**

(Volume 2)

Building a Military Machine

President Jayewardene, his fans and critics readily admit, was a grandmaster in political chess. He schemed three moves ahead when his opponent planned only two. He played the same game with Indira Gandhi. He countered her double track policy with three.

Jayewardene's three tracks were: buying time to build the military machine; weaken the moderates, isolate the militants and destroy the Tamil freedom struggle by showing it to the world as a terrorist problem; and destroying the territorial base of Tamil Eelam. These were the basis of his policies and actions during the four years, July 1983 to July 1987.

Jayewardene's main concern after his assumption of power in 1977 was the destruction of all opposition, Sinhala and Tamil. He destroyed the main opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the trade unions and even got his goondas to teach the Supreme Court judges a lesson. In the case of Tamils he was especially harsh.

Teaching the Tamils a lesson, as I pointed out earlier, was a policy formulated in 1961 by the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government. She dispatched an army unit to Jaffna to handle the Federal Party satyagraha which mobilized the entire Tamil community and paralyzed the government administration. The commanding officer of the army unit was reluctant to use force to disperse the satyagrahis as their protest was totally peaceful. Sirimavo Bandaranaike invited him to attend a special cabinet meeting in Colombo. At the cabinet meeting a powerful minister and some of his colleagues insisted that "Tamils should be taught a lesson." (Refer *Coup Theories and Officers Motives* by Prof. Donald Horowitz, Princeton University). The army fell in line and it dispersed the satyagrahis using force. Since that time, the army had been used to suppress the peaceful struggle Tamil people waged to win their rights.



Mr. Chelvanayakam is seen participating in a Satyagraha campaign in Trincomalee in 1961, with then parliamentarians (R-L) Mr. Thambiah Ehambaram (Muttur MP), Mr. N.R. Rajavarothiam (Trincomalee MP). (Courtesy TamilNet)

Jayewardene was determined to suppress Tamil militancy militarily. He needed to build the army to crush Tamil armed struggle. He needed external help to build the military machine. His first call for foreign help was made on 8 April 1983, three and a half months before the riots. On that day he announced that Sri Lanka's old pact with Britain was still valid and he hoped that Britain would come to Sri Lanka's help if attacked by a foreign country or the internal situation threatened

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the government.

His reference was to the agreement of 11 November 1947 between the two countries. Article 1 of that pact said Britain and Sri Lanka would "give to each other such military assistance for the security of their territories, for the defence against external aggression and for the protection of essential communications as it may be in their mutual interest to provide."

Jayewardene instructed the Sri Lankan High Commission in London to find out Britain's reaction through unofficial means. The High Commission, using its journalist contacts, asked the British Foreign Office for its reaction. The British official read to the journalist the text of Article 1 with emphasis on "as it may be in their mutual interest to provide." Thus the British official gave Sri Lanka the message that military aid was not available.

Jayewardene renewed his effort to obtain foreign help following Indira Gandhi's telephone call on 28 July, 1983, the fourth day of the anti-Tamil pogrom. Within hours, he asked for military help from the US, UK, Pakistan and China. He chose the four countries very carefully. He told the hurriedly summoned meeting of the inner cabinet on the night of 28 July that the US and UK would definitely help him. He said his pro-West foreign policy would be rewarded. They are bound to help him, their friend, he said. The cold war situation would also benefit him, he argued. He said the West was annoyed with India because of its Indo-Soviet Union Treaty. Pakistan and China, he reasoned, were India's enemies and thus would also help him.

Jayewardene's simplistic strategy failed. It failed because he ignored to take into account the basic fact in international relations that for nations their national interest is paramount and not friendships. When India warned those countries Jayewardene asked for help to keep off, they kept off. Indira Gandhi told them that, if Sri Lanka wanted military help, it should ask India first as it is the regional power. All countries accepted that doctrine without murmur.

President Ronald Reagan's administration refused to help Sri Lanka openly fearing that that would annoy India. The US at that time was building bridges with India and trying to draw it out of the Soviet Union's orbit. Britain was also reluctant to help Jayewardene. Pakistan and China were willing to sell military hardware. Pakistan readily undertook to train Sri Lankan soldiers in anti-guerrilla warfare. That again, infuriated India.

Jayewardene was not deterred by the refusal of the US and UK to help him. He sent Foreign Minister A C S Hameed to the US and UK who conveyed Jayewardene's disappointment to the top officials of those countries. Hameed had a detailed discussion with US Secretary of State George Shultz, who told him that the US would never let Jayewardene down. He assured assistance through other countries like Pakistan and South Africa. He also promised to get assistance from Israel.

George P. Schultz

Jayewardene also sent his brother, H W Jayewardene, to Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, China, Japan and Australia to drum up support for the Colombo government. All those countries readily condemned the 'terrorist attacks' by Tamil armed militants and criticized the Tamil Eelam demand. They avoided criticizing India. China was the only country that indirectly criticized India saying: "The big must not bully the small."

Tapping Israel

Jayewardene authorized his son, Ravi Jayewardene, to follow Shultz's suggestion of tapping Israel for help. Cabinet Secretary G V P Samarasinghe was sent on a secret mission to Israel. This negotiation was assisted by General Vernon Walters, President Reagan's troubleshooter on global affairs. Walters was a senior officer in the US intelligence establishment. He was perceived by Indian foreign policy planners as the man behind US administration's hostility towards India.



Jayewardene's effort to build his military machine needed time. Indira Gandhi's overt track of political talks suited him. She was pressuring him to negotiate with the moderate Tamil leadership, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), to work out a political settlement for the Tamil problem. Jayewardene used those talks to buy time.

The army had already been transformed into a Sinhala army, the defender of Sinhala interests. The Sinhala leadership had, from the time of independence, equated Sinhala interests with Sri Lankan interests. They adopted the majoritarian view that the state belonged to the majority race.

The transformation commenced in 1961. The army in that year suppressed the satyagraha and came into direct confrontation with Tamil youths. It was called upon to assist in maintaining law and order following the proclamation of emergency and the arrest of the Federal Party leaders. Tamil youths stoned the army night patrol and it shot at them, killing a few. Since then, clashes between the army and Tamil youths became a regular feature. Mutual hatred between them kept growing.

Under Jayewardene's rule, Tamil youths targeted the army for attack. The Thirunelveli ambush and the July riots completed the transformation of the army into a Sinhala army. Later it was turned into an anti-Tamil army. Tamils looked at the army as a Sinhala army, an occupation force. They called it a foreign army. They treated it as such.

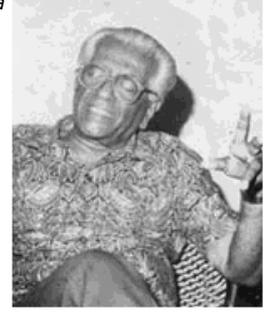
A few days after the riots Mervyn de Silva, a respected Sri Lankan journalist, asked the veteran left leader Dr. Colvin R. de Silva what he considered the most significant consequence of the riots. His reply was, "The army has been thrust into politics."

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Dr. Colvin R. de Silva

Jayewardene, having thrust the army into the ethnic conflict on the Sinhala side, wanted to expand and modernize it so that it could defeat the Tamils. He needed weapons and training. He kept pressing the US and UK for help.

The US, keen to assist Jayewardene, was interested in providing the Sinhalese a much-needed morale booster. With Indian intervention the Sinhalese had developed a sense of friendliness. Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger visited Sri Lanka on 1 October 1983 mainly as a show of support. Though Washington downplayed the Weinberger visit, saying that he "simply stopped over for tea," political columnists reported that military assistance was discussed. Opposition parties that were following the 'Israeli Connection' accused the government of trying to bring in Israel through the US.



US General Vernon Walters visited Colombo in the latter part of October. He came as Reagan's Special Envoy and had one-to-one meeting with Jayewardene. Jayewardene's biographers, K. M. de Silva and Howard Wriggins, asked Walters about the subject matter they discussed and recorded this in their book *J R Jayewardene of Sri Lanka: A Political Biography - Volume Two: From 1956 to His Retirement (1989)*: "Walters recalled that he advised the president to continue with his negotiations with the Tamil separatist groups and with India, and also expressed his fears that India might well take stronger measures, a hint of a possible military intervention, if the Sri Lankan situation deteriorated further, by which he appeared to mean further outbreaks of ethnic violence."



Casper Weinberger,

former US Defense Secretary

Wriggins and de Silva conveniently left out Jayewardene's recollection of the meeting. The discussion centered around the subject of finding ways and means of obtaining military assistance from Israel and the manner in which Sri Lanka should reciprocate. Walters, a tough bargainer, was pressing Jayewardene to agree to the diplomatic recognition of Israel, to agree to the new VOA agreement, and to bring Trincomalee harbour under American influence by leasing the oil tanks to US proxy companies along with permitting the American navy to use the harbour.

The visits of Weinberger and Walters, in quick succession, made India suspicious. India looked at Walters' visit with anger and anxiety. It regarded him as the architect of Washington's anti-India policy. It suspected the Walters- Jayewardene meeting to be an anti-Indian conspiracy. India informed Washington of its annoyance over Walters' visit, especially his not visiting India.

Walters' visit generated intense diplomatic activity between the US and Sri Lanka. In-depth discussions were held between the Sri Lankan envoy in Washington and Walters. Arrangements were discussed about the setting up of an Israeli interest section in the US embassy in Colombo, the establishment of the Voice of America relay station in Iranawila in the Chilaw district, the leasing of the Trincomalee oil tanks to a US-controlled company and rest and recreation facilities for the American navy in Trincomalee harbour.

Walters visited Sri Lanka again in December 1983. The prime purpose of the visit was to pursue the negotiations with Jayewardene on the three matters Walters had raised during his October visit. On the subject of the recognition of Israel definite progress had been achieved. Agreement was reached that the matter would be handled without allowing room to the opposition led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike to exploit the situation and swing the Muslims to its side. The opposition had severed diplomatic relations with Israel in 1970 to placate the local Muslim community and Muslim countries in the Middle East.

The strategy worked out on the Israeli matter was for Israel to loan Shin Beth intelligence officers to work with the Sri Lankan army and for the Sri Lankan government to permit the opening of an Israeli Interests Section in the US embassy in Colombo. Walters played a major role in the drafting of the agreement. Progress was also made about the VOA, oil tank and Trincomalee harbour projects.

David Matani, the assistant director of the Asian division of Israel's Foreign Ministry who was involved in the negotiations, came to Colombo in April 1984 to organize the interest section. The news leaked out and an SLFP member of parliament raised the matter in parliament during adjournment time. Lalith Athulathmudali, who had by then been appointed Minister of National Security, answered the question. He was vague and evasive. Athulathmudali, who had taught law in an Israeli university, was involved in the negotiations about the opening of the interest section.

Jayewardene presented the draft agreement to the cabinet on the third Wednesday of May. The two Muslim ministers in the cabinet, Transport Minister M H Mohamed and Foreign Minister A C S Hameed, opposed the agreement. They called the agreement a betrayal of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and the friendly Muslim states of the Middle East.

M H Mohammed 2003

Jayewardene told them that defeating Tamil terrorism was more important to him than satisfying the Muslims and announced that those who opposed the agreement were free to leave the government. That silenced Mohammed and Hameed and they stuck to their portfolios. Ministers Athulathmudali, Anandatissa de Alwis, and Gamini Dissanayake, all Jayewardene loyalists,



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strongly supported the agreement.

Muslims staged demonstrations opposing the opening of the Israeli section, but Jayewardene ignored those protests. Jayewardene issued a stern warning to the Muslims. He said his immediate concern was to defeat 'terrorism' and those who oppose the Israelis were supporting 'terrorism.' That silenced the Muslims.

He also ignored opposition's protests. SLFP president Sirimavo Bandaranaike issued a strong statement condemning the agreement. Her statement said:

"As leader of the SLFP and as the head of the government which ordered the closing down of the Israeli Mission I denounce this decision which may lead to only bringing the Arab-Israeli conflict and all its violence to our homeland at a time when this island itself is threatened with so much violence.

I call on all patriotic forces, regardless of race, creed and political affiliations to oppose this step which is a blatant attack on the national interests of Sri Lanka and its people."

LSSP leader Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, in similarly hard hitting statement, said recognition of Israel meant the abandonment of the island's non-alignment policy and signified the government moving towards the American camp. He said:

"Militarily, Israeli power is also a projection of US power in the Middle East."

Despite all this opposition the Israeli Interests Section was opened in the American Embassy on 24 May 1984. David Matani took charge of it. Israel appointed senior Israeli diplomat Agrail Karni on 24 October as its envoy.

Most of the Muslim countries condemned Colombo's decision. Saudi Arabia cancelled the funds it was providing for some development projects. Libya, Syria, Iran, and Jordan signified to Jayewardene their opposition.

Indira Gandhi expressed India's reservation in an interview she gave to the leading French newspaper *La Picaro*. She said induction of external forces into India's southern neighbour was a threat to her national security. "President Jayewardene says he is bringing the external forces to destroy terrorism. I hope Tamil people will not be massacred as before in the guise of destroying terrorists."

In the other areas – VOA and Trincomalee – Walters pushed Jayewardene to work out agreements favourable to the US. He pushed the Sri Lankan government to provide the 1000 acres of land to build the VOA transmitting facility as provided for in the agreement signed on August 1983. Agreement on the transfer of land was signed on 10 December 1983 and the Sri Lankan government handed over nearly 800 acres of land in the village of Thodduwa and 200 acres of land in the village of Iranwila in Nattandiya on 15 January 1985. India and the Soviet Union reacted strongly to the building of the VOA broadcasting station.

Sri Lanka was forced by Walters to take action to serve the interest of America in Trincomalee.

On 23 February, 1984 the Sri Lankan government leased the Trincomalee Tank Development Project to an international consortium consisting of three firms: Oroleum (Pvt) Ltd of Singapore, Oil Tanking of West Germany, and Tradinfant of Switzerland.

Walters also delivered to President Jayewardene a message from Ronald Reagan stressing the need for a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Reagan's message was considered by political analysts as a cover for Walters military mission. The message was intended to pacify India. Walters flew from Colombo to Delhi as part of that same effort.

But Walters, due to his overbearing style of diplomacy, angered Delhi instead of placating it. The Indian Foreign Ministry had received full reports about the Walters – Jayewardene meeting by the time Walters reached the Indian capital. The report gave a detailed account of the information Walters gave Jayewardene about the weapon training India was giving to Tamil militant groups. It also said he had told Athulathmudali, whom he met separately, that the United States had satellite photographs about the training camps in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. And Athulathmudali boasted to his media friends that Walters "is going to give the works" in Delhi. This account was duly conveyed to Indian High Commissioner Chhatwal, who passed the information to Delhi.

Walters tried hard to fulfill his mission in Delhi. He first pleaded with Indian Foreign Affairs officials to be more sensitive to Jayewardene's difficulties. He tried to portray Jayewardene as a good and reasonable ruler who was battling Sinhala chauvinism on one front and Tamil extremism on the other. The Indians refused to swallow that sugar-coated pill. "Then he resorted to his usual blackmail," a Foreign Ministry official whom I interviewed in Delhi told me.

Walters told the officials that India should stop training Tamil militants. Indians denied training the Tamil youths. He then said the United States had in its possession satellite photographs of the training camps and threatened to release them to the media if India refused to close them down. "That would put India in an embarrassing position," Walters threatened. It only made things worse for Sri Lanka.

India's suspicion that the US was supporting Jayewardene strengthened with the continued frequent visits of high-ranking US officials and legislators. A six-member delegation led by Joseph Adabbo, chairman of the Defense Appropriation Committee of the US House of Representatives, visited Colombo on 12 January 1984. The delegation recommended the immediate release of 3.5 million US dollars for defense purposes. It also promised to consider favourably the Sri Lankan request for a military-type ship and modern training facilities for the Sri Lankan Navy. Richard Murphy, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia, also visited Sri Lanka on 26 October 1984.



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Richard Murphy 2004

Congressman Joseph Adabbo (center)

with New York mayor Ed Koch

and House Speaker Tip O'Neil

National Security Ministry

Jayewardene's military preparations were more than matched by Tamil militants. The first batch of trainees who went to North India completed the 3 month course by the end of 1983. For the second batch training camps had been established in Tamil Nadu and in neighbouring Karnataka. Militant groups ran the camps in Tamil Nadu with the assistance of RAW and Indian instructors. RAW conducted two training camps in Bangalore for the LTTE.

While the trained cadres of the armed groups were pouring into the northern and eastern provinces, the Tamil National Army (TNA), a marginal group under Panagoda Maheswaran, struck the massive first blow in January 1984. Six young men walked into the Kattankudy branch of the People's Bank as it opened for business at 9 a.m. The militants took the Muslim manager hostage, locked the other officers in a room, cleaned out the vault and walked away with 240,000 rupees in cash and gold and jewellery worth 35 million rupees. The government was shocked because the northern militancy had spread to the east. And that was the biggest bank raid ever in Sri Lanka. Kattankudy was the home town of prosperous Muslim businessmen.

Police and the army launched a massive search and recovered part of the jewelry wrapped in plythene bags and buried in tins in a house. However, Maheswaran and his associates fled to Jaffna and from there they escaped to Tamil Nadu. With that money Maheswaran opened a training camp for the TNA on the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border. Maheswaran, who was an engineering student at London University before he returned to Jaffna to plunge into the freedom struggle, was an innovator par excellence. He took to manufacturing shotguns in the training camp.



The LTTE did not want to lose the initiative to the TNA. Three days after the Kattankudi bank robbery, the LTTE executed six criminals, thus taking upon itself the important role of the protector of the people.

Five of them were tied to lamp posts and the sixth was beheaded. Those who were tied to the lamp posts had bullet wounds in their heads. Handwritten cardboard announcements were placed near the bodies. They read: You are a traitor. This is the punishment meted out to traitors.

The five who were tied to the lamp posts were criminals. The sixth was a rapist. They had individually been told to reform themselves. They did not take any notice. The LTTE also issued a general warning to criminals through a leaflet. Many mocked it.

The leaflet headlined, **Wipe out anti-social elements**, said the freedom struggle should not lead to the rule of anti-social elements. Freedom fighters also have a duty to protect the people from crime and unruliness. The leaflet appealed to the anti-social elements to stop their criminal deeds. The final sentence of the leaflet warned: If those involved in anti-social activities fail to give up their activities, they will be eliminated.

Law and order had deteriorated in the Jaffna peninsula since 1982. Police had gradually abandoned their law and order maintenance function after the attack on the Anaikoddai and Chavakachcheri police stations. Police had closed down 16 small police stations. Police had also restricted their activities to mobile patrols. That also was curtailed after Indian-trained militant groups returned to the Jaffna peninsula. Police feared landmine attacks and ambushes. Anti-social elements took advantage of this situation. Theft, thuggery and rape flourished. The LTTE decided to protect the people from criminals.

The LTTE's 'lamp post killings' was criticized by the other militant groups, especially by EROS and the EPRLF. They said the LTTE had overstepped the mark. Freedom fighters should not arrogate to themselves the role of a state, they said. Democracy and rule of law are sacrosanct, they argued.

LTTE answered these criticisms with a statement. It read:

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"We executed only the dangerous anti-social elements who were not only hardcore criminals but also traitors acting as the agents of the State to sabotage our people's cause. We arrested these notorious criminals and conducted lengthy trials investigating their criminal activities and punished them accordingly. Hardcore criminals were executed in public and others were set free with severe warning."

LTTE also introduced a new type of people's tribunal called *Sankilian Panchayam*. It was based on the traditional Hindu judicial system called the *panchayat*. Village elders meet at a common place, hear the case and pass judgment. The LTTE named the system *Sankilian Panchayam* after Sankilian, the last King of Jaffna. *Sankilian Panchayam* was the origin of the well-developed judicial system the LTTE now implements in the territory it controls in the NorthEast.

The executions had the desired effect. Criminal activities decreased. People welcomed the LTTE action. The public started looking on LTTE cadres as their protectors. Pirapaharan told his cadres to build on that image. "Make the people feel that you are their protectors," was the message Pirapaharan chanted like a *mantra* during training classes and passing out parades.

Restricting the movement of the army and the police and freeing Tamil soil from the government's control was the next phase of the Tamil freedom struggle. It was called *Man Meedpu Por* (Struggle to Recover the Soil). All Tamil militant groups were united in achieving that objective. The LTTE took the lead. The LTTE started the struggle by demolishing the Gurunagar army buildings in February 1984 and by killing two airforce men on 20 March 1984.

The army unit housed in the Gurunagar Army Camp in Jaffna was shifted to Palaly after the July 1983 riots due to a shortage of manpower. The buildings in the Gurunagar camp were vacant. In March 1984 it was rumoured that the army was planning to return. The LTTE blasted the buildings to prevent their return.

Two airforce men, Rohan Jayasekera and Sarath Anurasiri, travelled in a Ceylon Transport Board bus from Jaffna bus stand to Kondavil. LTTE cadres who had got to know this stopped the bus near Kondavil ordered the other passengers to disembark and shot and killed the two airforce men. That was the first attack on defence personnel after the July 1983 riots.

When the news reached Colombo the All Party Conference (APC) was in session at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. Athulathmudali was the APC's media spokesman. He told the press briefing that followed the APC session about the killing. He added: "The LTTE terrorists are out to disturb the APC. They are against the peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict. The terrorists should be destroyed if we are to work out a political settlement to the ethnic problem."

Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall 2004

I covered the press briefing for the *Daily News*. Athulathmudali told me, after the briefing, that President Jayewardene desired him to make the statement about the destruction of the terrorists and indicated that prominence be given to it. I conveyed the message to editor Manick de Silva who used the story as the side lead. The lead story was also written by me. It was about the setting up of two committees by President Jayewardene. I will deal with that in a subsequent chapter.



Three days later, on 23 March 1984, Athulathmudali was appointed Minister of National Security and Deputy Minister of Defence, in addition to his portfolio of Minister of Trade and Shipping.

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Chapter 15. JR Visits China and US

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