

Sri Lanka's Balancing Act in an Age of Unilateralism

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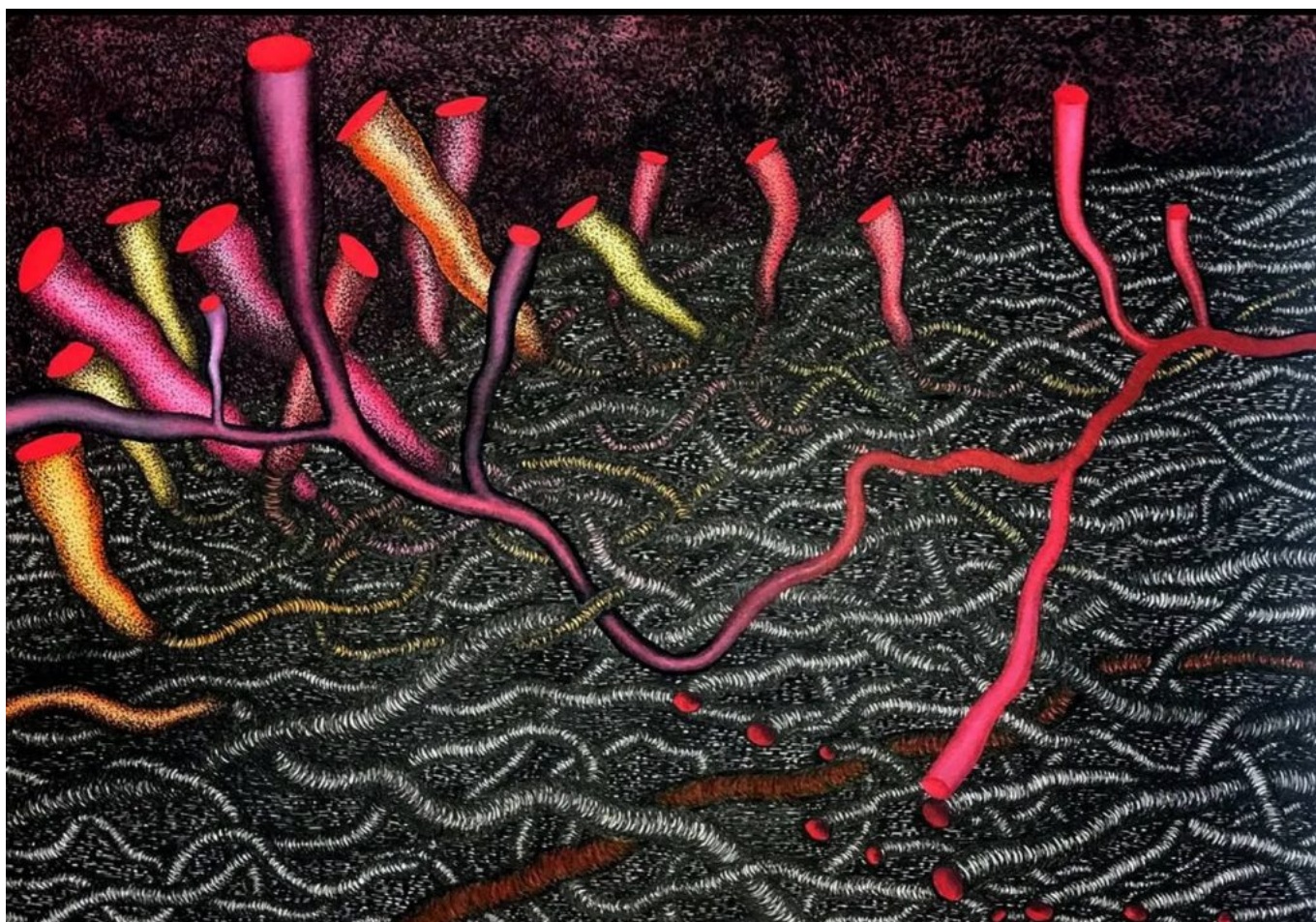
Gayan Prageet (Sri Lanka), *What are You Trying to Hide?*, 2015.

Dear friends,

On 20 March 2026, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake made a startling revelation in parliament. He revealed that the government had declined a United States request to land two aircraft armed with anti-ship missiles at the Mattala airport in the south of the country. The president stated that the government turned down the US request to maintain Sri Lanka's neutrality in the ongoing war on Iran.

President Disanayake's statement received significant attention in international **media**. This was the second

time Sri Lanka was the subject of such attention. Previously, when the US torpedoed the unarmed Iranian warship *IRIS Dena* in the Indian Ocean, within Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone, the Sri Lankan government offered humanitarian assistance to the survivors and admitted a second Iranian vessel (*IRIS Busehr*) to the Sri Lankan ports, helping evacuate its crew. Explaining the reason for this decision, the president **stated** '... while safeguarding neutrality, we place humanity above all else ... If there are actions that must be taken to protect human lives, we will not hesitate to take them under any circumstances'.



Pushpakanthan Pakkiyarajah (Sri Lanka), *Blooded Flowerscape*, 2024-2025.

The Balancing Act

In revealing his decision to not allow US warplanes in Sri Lanka, the President was responding to critics who allege that the Sri Lankan government has been following a policy aimed at appeasing the US. Since being elected to government in September 2024, the National People's Power (NPP), led by Dissanayake, has been walking a tightrope in foreign policy.

The NPP was formed by the left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 2019 as a broader front aimed at appealing to a wider constituency. The JVP identifies itself as a Marxist-Leninist party and has been a vocal critic of imperialism since its founding as a militant insurrectionary organisation in the 1960s. When in opposition, the party frequently organised events and protests in solidarity with countries under US aggression like Cuba and Venezuela; the JVP was also heavily involved in pro-Palestine activism.

The NPP rose to power in the aftermath of the 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis; the masses disillusioned by the established political parties mobilised around the NPP's platform. The party's slogans were mainly critical of the rampant corruption among the established political elite. The political and economic situation that the NPP inherited once in government was extremely complex. The government had to function within the constraints imposed by the IMF Extended Fund Facility programme that the previous government had entered into. Despite leftist critics outside the government **urging** it to quit the programme, the NPP's pragmatic position was to maintain continuity and stability while renegotiating terms to ease the burden of austerity on the masses.

The official line of the NPP government is that the country is in a difficult and vulnerable position, and therefore a degree of economic stability should be achieved before considering drastic economic reforms. This cautious attitude is reflected in its foreign policy preferences as well. One principal challenge the government inherited was balancing Sri Lanka's relationship with the two regional powers – India and China. As the immediate neighbour, India has long been sceptical about Sri Lanka's ties with China, which had been growing amid the Belt and Road Initiative. Once in government, Dissanayake visited India on his first foreign tour and **declared** that Sri Lanka would never allow its territory to be used against India's national security interests.

A trip to China followed this visit. In Beijing, the NPP government entered into an agreement to accelerate the construction of an oil refinery by Chinese company Sinopec in the southern city of Hambantota. With an investment of 3.7 billion dollars, this would bring Sri Lanka significant benefits if it materialises. Despite the JVP's strong fraternal **ties** with the Communist Party of China, the NPP government has been careful not to provoke India in its dealings with Beijing.



Gayan Prageet (Sri Lanka), *Bitter Kitchen IV*, 2021.

Ambivalence in Diplomacy

The pragmatism the NPP government has shown in foreign affairs has led to several controversies. For instance, the government decided to continue a previously existing agreement to send Sri Lankan workers to Israel for employment. Furthermore, the influx of Israeli tourists into Sri Lanka and the government's decision to grant Israelis visa-free entry, along with some other foreign nationals, sparked an **outcry** among pro-Palestine activists.

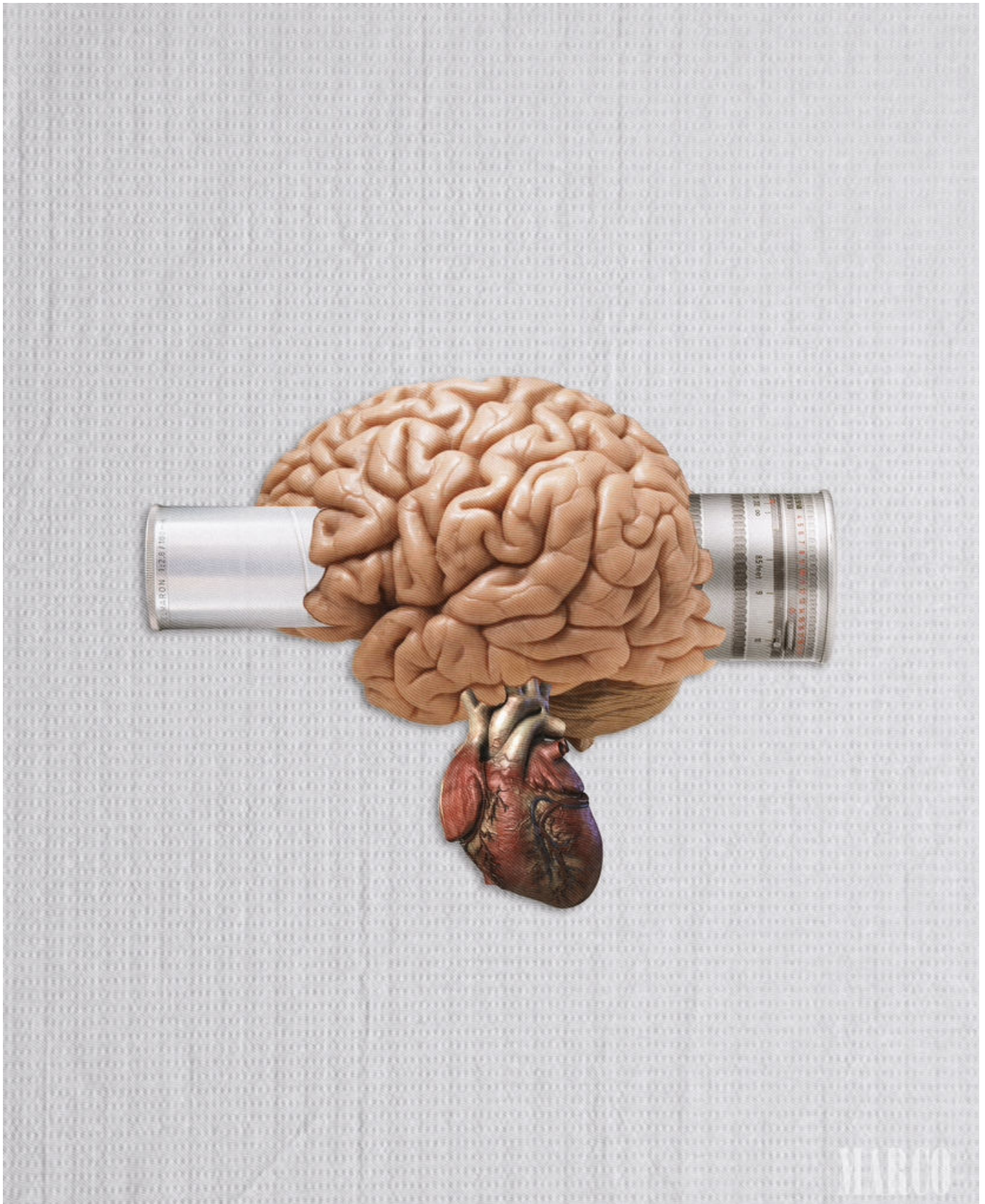
The government justifies these concessions on economic **grounds**, as Sri Lanka's weak economy is desperate for foreign exchange. At the diplomatic level, the government has supported various initiatives at the United Nations, including **condemning** Israel's actions in Palestine. However, this formal stance sits uneasily with continued economic relations with the genocidal state.

The other factor that has made matters challenging for Sri Lanka is the aggressive foreign policy turn of the

second administration of US President Donald Trump. The US Department of State, in a 2025 report on Sri Lanka's investment climate, **described** the situation as follows:

‘... The NPP's commitment to the country's \$3 billion, four-year (2023–2027) Extended Fund Facility IMF program reassured investors, but many remain wary given the NPP leadership's historically anti-Western, Marxist-influenced ideology.’

The report is also critical of the NPP government's decision to halt the privatisation of SOEs planned under the previous administration, and its refusal to implement the neoliberal Economic Transformation Act (2024) enacted by the same. In April 2025, during Trump's 'Liberation Day' proclamation of tariff increases, Sri Lankan exports were slapped with a 44% tariff. Given Sri Lanka's dependence on the US market (which accounts for around 40% of Sri Lankan apparel exports), this could have been devastating for the country's already weak economy. Subsequently, the government negotiated and reduced the tariff rate to 20%.



Mahela 'Marco' Manamperi (Sri Lanka), *Exodus*, n.d.

In the context of the US' aggressive unilateralism, the NPP government has exercised great caution in

commenting on international affairs, likely out of fear of retaliation. For instance, following the recent US aggression against Iran, the Sri Lankan foreign ministry issued a carefully worded statement highlighting the need to respect the UN Charter and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, while avoiding any reference to the US.

Nevertheless, Sri Lanka also refused to join a United Nations Security Council Resolution **condemning** Iran which was sponsored by Gulf states along with more than 130 nations, including India and Pakistan. Addressing parliament, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath called the resolution unbalanced as it only attributed responsibility to one party:

‘... As a country, even though we are small, we took a firm and clear decision that we will not support unbalanced proposals’.

In the aftermath of the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores on 3 January 2026, the Sri Lankan government issued a similar **statement** emphasising the importance of respecting the sovereign rights of the Venezuelan people without denouncing the US explicitly. However, the JVP, in the capacity of a political party, released a strongly-worded **statement** condemning ‘the United States of America’s military aggression against the independent and sovereign State of Venezuela and the abduction of democratically elected President Nicholas Maduro’.



Jagath Weerasinghe (Sri Lanka), *The Troubled Land*, 2025.

The Contradiction

The ambivalence of Sri Lanka's foreign policy under the presidency of Dissanayake reflects a deeper contradiction within which the NPP government operates. On the one hand, the NPP is led by a political party (the JVP) with a strong left-wing, anti-imperialist background and a committed cadre disciplined along Leninist organisational principles. It is this discipline among cadres that earned the party a reputation as a political force with integrity and incorruptibility.

On the other hand, the government is functioning in an adverse environment, characterised by numerous domestic and external restraints. Being a smaller country in the global capitalist periphery and facing serious economic constraints, Sri Lanka is exposed to significant external vulnerabilities. The ongoing oil price crisis following the war on Iran has worsened the country's economic burdens. These vulnerabilities require the government to exercise caution and compromise in decision-making.

The openly aggressive behaviour of US imperialism further restrains the autonomy of small and indebted countries like Sri Lanka. A culture of unilateralism is increasingly overshadowing international relations. The situation has become more complicated due to India's ambiguous position in the international arena. Once a vocal member of the Non-Aligned Movement, India has sought a strategic alliance with the US and expanded relations with the state of Israel under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's **failure** to condemn the US attack on *IRIS Dena*, which was in fact hosted by India during a joint exercise, has caused significant outcry within the country. Though not bound by India's foreign policy preferences, Sri Lanka is also not in a position to totally ignore India in making calculations.

The contradiction between upholding its historical anti-imperialist convictions and balancing geopolitical realities in a hostile international environment will continue to define the foreign policy trajectory of Sri Lanka's NPP government for the foreseeable future.

Warmly,

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