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<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5064-7839> (2022) "'In the Mutual Interest": The Making and Breaking of the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement, 1947-1957'. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 50 (6). pp. 1093-1122.

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The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fich20>

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To cite this article: Robert Barnes (2022): 'In the Mutual Interest': The Making and Breaking of the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement, 1947–1957, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, DOI: [10.1080/03086534.2022.2084932](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2022.2084932)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2022.2084932>



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Published online: 20 Jun 2022.



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'In the Mutual Interest': The Making and Breaking of the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement, 1947–1957

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ABSTRACT



Historians have lavished enormous attention on British decolonisation but Britain's post-imperial military relationships with its former colonies have too often been overlooked. The 1947 United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement established as a condition of the island's independence was the first such military arrangement. Crucially, this agreement was vaguely conceived to serve 'in the mutual interest' of both states. Yet this article demonstrates that negotiations to implement the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement produced deep rifts between London and Colombo. Both Labour and Conservative governments viewed Ceylon as vital to the defence of the Empire-Commonwealth in the Cold War due to its geostrategic position. Britain thus had to retain access to its bases on the island. Still, Britain's financial constraints and global military commitments forced London to press Ceylon to contribute more to Commonwealth defence. In contrast, Ceylon's first three prime ministers desired a British military presence to provide a cheap deterrent to an apparently imminent Indian invasion. Nevertheless, Colombo also sought to dispel claims the Defence Agreement derogated Ceylon's sovereignty. By 1956, therefore, the election of a Sinhalese nationalist government in Ceylon and Britain's Suez fiasco confirmed the Defence Agreement no longer served 'in the mutual interest' and it was swiftly terminated.

KEYWORDS

Britain; Ceylon (Sri Lanka);
defence; decolonisation;
Cold War; empire;
Commonwealth

Introduction

The disintegration of the British Empire represented one of the most significant geopolitical processes of the twentieth century. It has thus rightly been the focus of intense historiographical scrutiny since the Second World War. Yet historians have lavished far less attention on relations between Britain and its former colonies after independence. It is as if the story ended with the lowering of the Union Jack in the far-flung corners of the world. But Britain retained

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close, if often strained, connections with the vast majority of these newly-independent states through the Commonwealth, trade and cultural links, migration, and defence agreements. This last factor, in particular, has been largely forgotten since only certain former colonies entered into formal military arrangements with Britain and many of these alliances did not last long. For both Labour and Conservative British governments in the post-war period, however, retaining access to military facilities across the globe was a key priority since decolonisation coincided with the height of the Cold War. Furthermore, in this dangerous climate many new states, usually with limited resources, felt the only way to ensure their hard won sovereignty was under British protection. For these governments, it was a case of better the devil you know. The United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement that existed between 1947 and 1957 clearly demonstrated this symbiotic relationship.

Unsurprisingly, less attention has been paid to the relatively smooth path taken by Ceylon – renamed Sri Lanka in 1972 – to independence than that of the British Raj given the Indian subcontinent's size and status in the British Empire as well as the violence that took place leading to Partition. Still, in the decade or so following Ceylon's independence a number of histories were written about these events and the country's relatively stable infancy, especially by British figures who had been actively involved, such as Sir Charles Jeffries, the Colonial Office official responsible for negotiating with Ceylon's nationalist leaders, and Sir Ivor Jennings, the author of Ceylon's Constitution. These works, written before archival material was declassified, generally promoted Ceylon as a model to follow for other colonies seeking freedom.¹ Yet as Ceylon subsequently descended into sectarian civil strife the island's place in the story of decolonisation was increasingly ignored. More recently, though, a number of historians, mainly from Sri Lanka, have returned to the crucial years immediately before and after independence. In particular, K. M. de Silva, editor of the excellent Sri Lanka volume of the *British Documents on the End of Empire* series, has written prolifically on the topic.² These historians have largely emphasised the flaws underlying Ceylon's independence that led to the country's later problems.³ Nevertheless, none of these works focuses specifically on the controversial making and breaking of the 1947 Defence Agreement. The closest example is a recent article by L. M. Ratnapalan that examines Anglo-Ceylonese relations after independence and goes into detail on strategic affairs. But Ratnapalan is more focused on their impact on Ceylon's domestic politics and on the late 1950s and early 1960s when the governments of S. W. R. D Bandaranaike and – following his assassination in 1959 – his widow Sirimavo radically altered Ceylon's political and foreign policy landscape.⁴ Similarly, in the vast array of works examining Britain's role in the Cold War the military alliance with Ceylon is rarely mentioned.⁵

Using relatively neglected British and Sri Lankan foreign policy and military records this article will redress this absence. It will demonstrate that during the

negotiations for Ceylon's independence after the Second World War defence issues predominated. London was not prepared to grant Ceylon Dominion status until its continued use of military facilities on the island was assured while the Ceylonese nationalists welcomed the retained British presence to deter an Indian invasion. To ensure both parties' interests were met, therefore, the Defence Agreement was framed to serve 'in the mutual interest'. Once Ceylon was a sovereign state, however, attempts to implement the defence arrangements were far more contentious. The Labour government was determined to retain British bases as well as Colombo's goodwill. But Britain became increasingly exasperated as it sought to balance global military commitments with limited financial resources. Successive Conservative governments were under similar pressures but were content to accept more informal defence arrangements with Ceylon. At the same time, Ceylon's first three moderate pro-British prime ministers believed the vague Defence Agreement secured their nation. Yet severe economic constraints and political calls to defend Ceylon's recently-won sovereignty demanded they pursue military relations with Britain on their terms. After years of rising tensions, the election of a radical nationalist Ceylonese government as well as the weakening of Britain's global position after the Suez Crisis led to the final demise of the Defence Agreement in 1957.

Ceylon's Independence and the Defence Agreement

As stated above, Ceylon's path to independence is a relatively well-known story. To understand the significance of the 1947 Defence Agreement, however, it is crucial to consider the role of security issues in this process. Since being conquered during the Napoleonic Wars to prevent it from falling into French hands, the British had always seen Ceylon principally in geostrategic terms. While Ceylon was a relatively wealthy colony whose tea, rubber and coconut plantations were important to the imperial economy, its location in the Indian Ocean at the heart of the trading, military and communication networks linking the British Empire's western and eastern parts gave the island a status far beyond that of much larger and richer colonies. This fact was made clearer than ever during the Second World War after the fall of the supposedly impregnable base at Singapore and Japanese forces were at India's borders. Suddenly, the British war effort in Asia became reliant on its facilities on Ceylon, especially the Royal Navy's East Indies Station base at Trincomalee and the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Katunayake base at Negombo. Moreover, Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia Command, established his headquarters at Kandy in the centre of the island. Britain had thus long recognised that to successfully utilise this strategic asset it had to maintain the goodwill of the Ceylonese. What is more, Ceylon's political elite were, in the main, willing to cooperate with British rule since their wealth was largely derived from imperial trade. Consequently,

Ceylon had been granted considerable autonomy and the Colonial Office viewed the island as the 'model colony'. This collaboration reached its zenith during the war when, in stark contrast to the Quit India Movement, Ceylon's Board of Ministers offered its complete support to the British war effort.

By the end of the war, therefore, Ceylon's leaders had gained much first-hand experience of government, most notably Don Stephen (D. S.) Senanayake, Vice-Chairman of the Board of Ministers. Senanayake had made his fortune through trade before becoming a key figure in the Ceylon National Congress. Even so, Senanayake was a proud anglophile who was deeply committed to British democratic political institutions and believed Ceylon had to evolve constitutionally to Dominion status rather than demanding independence. Nevertheless, the Second World War massively weakened British power and accelerated the pace of change in South Asia. Senanayake, in consequence, stepped up his campaign with the new Labour Government of Clement Attlee. The Colonial Office, in contrast, insisted the Soulbury Constitution – granting a new Ceylonese Parliament self-government in all areas except defence and external affairs – agreed during the war needed to be first successfully implemented. In late 1946, however, Senanayake resigned and formed the United National Party (UNP) – amalgamating the Ceylon National Congress with numerous moderate Buddhist Sinhalese, Hindu Tamil and Muslim parties – to run in the forthcoming general election. While far from representing a coherent political party, the UNP appeared to the Labour government to be willing to secure British defence and economic interests in Ceylon. In addition, on 20 February 1947 Attlee announced India would be granted full independence by 30 June 1948. Senanayake thus demanded Ceylon – as a loyal wartime ally – receive the same treatment.⁶

Tellingly, though, Senanayake revealed to the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Henry Moore, that he was gravely concerned for the future defence of an independent Ceylon. Senanayake feared his small and militarily weak country was at risk of being absorbed by India. He even claimed the leader of the Indian National Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru, had made clear in their conversations that he wished to make 'an independent India the dominant power in this part of the world with or without alliances with China and possibly Russia, so that there may be a strong Eastern Asiatic block arrayed against the Western Powers'. Consequently, Senanayake felt Nehru wanted to get his hands on the Trincomalee and Katunayake bases. At the same time, Senanayake recognised Britain's 'feverish search for Empire bases' with the Cold War emerging. As a result, Senanayake promised if independence was granted he would negotiate 'some permanent form of agreement' to meet Britain's 'legitimate defence requirements'.⁷

Moore and Secretary of State for the Colonies Arthur Creech Jones promptly backed Senanayake's proposal. Attlee, however, facing numerous other domestic and international issues, was disinterested in Ceylon.⁸ Undeterred, though, Creech Jones agreed to hold talks regarding Ceylon's future

constitutional status. During these negotiations Senanayake's representative and closest adviser, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, pressed the British government to announce immediately its decision to grant Ceylon full responsible government. In return, Goonetilleke proposed 'an agreement in respect of Defence and External Affairs' be negotiated and ready for when the Ceylonese Parliament was elected.⁹ Creech Jones thus informed the British Cabinet that prompt Ceylonese independence offered an 'excellent opportunity' to secure 'our vital strategic interests'.¹⁰ Still, the British Chiefs of Staff were more cautious given Ceylon's centrality in their strategic plans, especially since Britain had failed to secure a defence agreement with India, and opposed any concessions until a firm defence agreement had been agreed. The Cabinet, therefore, concluded that Ceylon's constitutional evolution must proceed slowly but was prepared to enter into negotiations regarding defence as well as external affairs, the rights of minorities, and the future of British public officers serving in Ceylon. Once these agreements had been reached Britain would announce it wished to advance Ceylon to self-governing status at the earliest practicable date.¹¹

In early June 1947, this statement went through a number of redrafts before being conveyed to Senanayake. But the Ceylonese leader immediately rejected the statement as 'retrograde'. He also opposed any mention of independence being conditional on various agreements being negotiated since these would be attacked by his opponents as derogating Ceylon's sovereignty.¹² In response, Creech Jones proposed to Attlee the statement announce Ceylon would immediately attain Dominion status once agreements had been reached but avoiding reference to the subjects of these arrangements.¹³ Both Attlee and Senanayake agreed to this revised version of the announcement and, on 18 June 1947, Creech Jones delivered the statement in the House of Commons.¹⁴ Negotiations then commenced in London with the defence agreement quickly dominating discussions.

On the British side, the Chiefs of Staff concluded that, with the Cold War mounting, Britain must continue to hold responsibility for the island's defence. In return, Britain would have the right to station armed forces, and have continued use of its extensive facilities, throughout Ceylon. The British military would also need to develop Ceylon's own forces to defend the island. Lastly, the agreement had to have permanency. Creech Jones, Moore and Goonetilleke agreed to these broad terms to prevent delaying Ceylon's independence and felt specific military details could be left to be decided after independence. Even so, Jones was concerned if no time limit was set the defence agreement could be seen to derogate Ceylon's sovereignty.¹⁵ Attlee also supported the draft defence agreement but opposed inserting any time limit since this would only encourage the Ceylonese government to use it as 'the object of throwing off the last remaining evidence of British control'. But Attlee recognised Britain could not demand the right to

permanently base its forces on Ceylon. As a pragmatic means to overcome this problem, therefore, the Cabinet agreed to insert at numerous places in the defence agreement the phrase 'in the mutual interest' to denote the agreement remained in force for only as long as both parties found it valuable. Only Hugh Dalton, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, expressed doubts regarding the dangerous nature of such a non-binding defence agreement without a time limit and prophetically warned Britain would encounter grave difficulties when negotiating detailed military arrangements after Ceylon's independence.¹⁶

Over the following weeks, the other agreements dominated the negotiations and Senanayake was preoccupied campaigning for Ceylon's first parliamentary elections held between 23 August and 20 September 1947. In fact, the results were rather disappointing for Senanayake since his UNP failed to win an outright majority and was forced to enter into a coalition with the All Ceylon Tamil Congress. Still, the numerous radical nationalist and Marxist parties remained small and divided and Senanayake, now both Prime Minister and Minister of Defence and External Affairs, was able to follow through on the plan for independence. Creech Jones was also in no mood to delay and transmitted to Senanayake the drafts texts of three separate agreements – on defence, external affairs and on public officers – and the new Ceylonese Cabinet promptly authorised the Prime Minister to sign these.¹⁷ On 11 November 1947, then, Senanayake signed the White Paper, 'Proposals for conferring on Ceylon fully responsible status within the British Commonwealth Nations', that had the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement as its first appendix.¹⁸

Opposition parties in Ceylon, however, quickly seized upon the Defence Agreement. Serious questions were asked why such an agreement had been entered into before Parliament had considered it and whether the continued British military presence circumscribed Ceylon's independence. These critics particularly questioned why Ceylon must sign such a far-reaching defence agreement while India had refused to enter into military relations with Britain at independence.¹⁹ These accusations boiled over at the official opening of the Ceylonese Parliament on 25 November 1947 with some opponents claiming secret military clauses existed granting Britain additional powers to intervene in Ceylon's internal affairs. In response, Senanayake stressed Ceylon could not 'get a greater friend than Britain' and that 'as I look round the countries of the world, I see at the moment only one country with sufficient interest in us to defend us at their expense, and that country is Great Britain'. Senanayake also argued that the Defence Agreement in no way infringed upon Ceylon's sovereignty since British forces would remain on the island only while this was in Ceylon's interest. These comments appeared to stymie criticisms for the time being.²⁰

Meanwhile, on 13 November 1947 the Ceylon Independence Bill was laid before the British Parliament. Few dissented from the ultimate goal of

Ceylonese independence but some Conservatives Members of Parliament questioned the Defence Agreement, particularly the indefinite clauses allowing Ceylon to revoke it at any time. Creech Jones and his supporters, however, defended the non-binding nature of the agreement since this was not in keeping with relations with another Commonwealth member and was unnecessary given Ceylon's firm desire to retain the British military presence. These arguments proved effective and on 26 November 1947, the Ceylon Independence Bill was adopted.²¹ The Defence Agreement then came into force on 4 February 1948 when Ceylon was finally granted Dominion status.

Evidently, the British and Ceylonese governments believed the 1947 Defence Agreement would form the essential basis for their close relationship after independence. Moreover, since the agreement served 'in the mutual interest' London and Colombo had little doubt it would be swiftly and successfully implemented. Yet the negotiations leading to the Defence Agreement had made it abundantly clear British and Ceylonese security interests were very different. The Labour government, on one hand, saw Ceylon principally as the linchpin for the defence of the Empire-Commonwealth vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Senanayake, on the other hand, saw the Defence Agreement as a means to secure his country on the cheap from attack from neighbouring India.²² Colombo was, however, already aware that the Defence Agreement brought political drawbacks given the serious questions raised regarding Ceylon's sovereignty. For the Defence Agreement to remain 'in the mutual interest', therefore, these differing perspectives had to continue to coalesce. This proved very difficult for a Britain struggling to meet its global defence commitments as well as a Ceylon facing the realities of government for the first time.

Labour, D. S. Senanayake, and Fluctuating Negotiations, 1948–1951

On his return from representing the Labour government at Ceylon's independence celebrations the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Patrick Gordon Walker, concluded 'if we treat them strictly as a Dominion, they will behave very like a loyal colony'.²³ Over the next three and a half years during the negotiations to implement the 1947 Defence Agreement this sentiment dominated the Labour government's approach since Attlee did desire a mutually-beneficial military relationship with Ceylon. Moreover, Senanayake made it clear to Gordon Walker while he was in Ceylon that his government wanted as large a British military presence on the island as possible. Nevertheless, Senanayake revealed to Gordon Walker his other priority: avoiding accusations at home and abroad that Ceylon's newly-won independence was limited by the continued British military presence. Consequently, tensions soon emerged over how the Defence Agreement would be implemented 'in the mutual interest'.

Negotiations began just days after independence since the Ceylonese government wanted to swiftly finalise the military details so the Defence Agreement would not jeopardise Ceylon's admission to the United Nations (UN). Senanayake's solution was for Ceylon to purchase the land on which the bases were built – giving Colombo sovereign control over these facilities – and then lease them back to Britain. The Labour government agreed to this proposal but on the condition Britain's tenure at the bases was secured for as long as they required use of the facilities. Otherwise, Britain could not spend money on bases from which it could be asked to withdraw at any moment.²⁴ These proposals contained the seeds of the major problems encountered that will be examined below. Yet the initial talks appeared to make progress with both sides agreeing Britain should simply prepare a list of all the facilities it desired and for Colombo to purchase these and leases to be agreed. A joint declaration containing these arrangements would then be issued as an addendum to the 1947 Defence Agreement rather than a new binding treaty being signed.²⁵

In June 1948, nevertheless, Colombo postponed the negotiations after applying to the UN. Colombo was determined to secure UN recognition but feared the Soviet Union would claim Ceylon was not a fully sovereign state if a new defence declaration with Britain was announced. At the same time, while supportive of Ceylon's UN application, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Philip Noel-Baker was annoyed by Senanayake's decision and was concerned if Moscow did block Ceylon's admission Colombo might seek to abrogate the Defence Agreement.²⁶ Still, when the Soviet Union exercised its veto Colombo did not abandon its alliance with Britain. Instead, Senanayake adopted a much firmer anti-Soviet position. While A. Jeyaratnam Wilson accurately describes Senanayake's rhetoric as a 'red herring', the Ceylonese Prime Minister now claimed Ceylon was a potential target for Soviet aggression given its strategic position.²⁷ In addition, Senanayake warned Parliament that Ceylon needed British military assistance to 'defend ourselves against the enemy that is knocking at the door' or else Ceylon would become a Soviet puppet.²⁸

In this atmosphere the defence negotiations were kick-started while Senanayake was in London for his first Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in October 1948. During the discussions on Commonwealth defence little was said about Ceylon but Senanayake privately assured Gordon Walker and Minister of Defence A.V. Alexander that as long as he was in power British forces would not be asked to leave his country. But Gordon Walker and Alexander stressed Britain required indefinite rights to the bases on Ceylon if it were to defend the island. It was thus decided that the Ministry of Defence would send its representative, Eion Donaldson, to Ceylon to discuss specific military arrangements.²⁹ Talks between Donaldson and Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan, the Ceylonese Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs and

Defence, thus commenced in March 1949 but soon became deadlocked. Donaldson's ultimate objective was to convince the Ceylonese government to begin purchasing the land on which the bases were built and then declaring Britain's security of tenure at these facilities. But Vaithianathan insisted it was impossible to explain to the Ceylonese people that one of the results of independence was to spend Ceylon's limited resources on land to maintain British military facilities on the island.³⁰

With the defence negotiations beginning to stall attention shifted back to London where Senanayake was again present for a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting, this time focusing on India's future relationship with the organisation after becoming a republic. In light of this issue, and rising tensions with New Delhi over the Ceylon Citizenship Act that discriminated against the 700,000 Indian Tamils living in Ceylon, Senanayake revealed to Noel-Baker his deep concerns regarding India's ambition of becoming the regional hegemon.³¹ In response, Noel-Baker bluntly stated India posed no threat to Ceylon while the Royal Navy dominated the Indian Ocean but argued Britain, struggling to recover economically from the Second World War, could no longer afford its global defence costs of £760 million per year. Instead, all Commonwealth countries, including Ceylon, had to bear greater responsibility for defence.³² Senanayake was clearly taken aback by the Labour government's new tougher stance and warned Alexander that Ceylon's security was only placed under threat due to the presence of the British bases. As such, he argued his government should not have to bear any of the costs associated with the British presence. Noel-Baker, therefore, rightly concluded that the defence negotiations were forfeiting the goodwill gained with Ceylon at independence.³³

Consequently, in an attempt to clarify Britain's strategic plans and mollify the Ceylonese government, the Chiefs of Staff produced a report titled 'Appreciation of the Military Requirements in Ceylon'. This report reiterated Ceylon's geostrategic importance but stated there was 'no immediate external threat to Ceylon in war' and called for the gradual rundown of installations on the island to a 'care and maintenance' basis during peacetime. The Appreciation also recommended Ceylon's forces be built up and assume greater defence responsibilities.³⁴ Senanayake, however, expressed deep concern with the rundown plans and warned the embryonic Ceylonese military services could not defend the island from external threats. Senanayake also protested that the Appreciation provided little detail regarding Britain's strategic plans in a global war claiming Ceylon was like 'Belgium in Europe' and would inevitably be dragged into any major conflict. Still, Senanayake emphasised Ceylon would be 'on the right side' in a 'Communism versus Democracy' war.³⁵

The Labour government was greatly alarmed by Senanayake's emotional response and, after much discussion, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Sir William Slim, agreed to visit Colombo to explain Britain's

strategic thinking. In doing so, Slim stated Ceylon's fate in a global war would depend on events elsewhere. As such, Britain could not guarantee Ceylon's security but would provide all it could to defend the island if it was threatened. Slim also emphasised British forces had to remain flexible given the expanding range of Cold War threats, particularly with the recent Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War. Senanayake initially appeared to accept this argument.³⁶ In January 1950, though, Britain revealed it wanted to rundown the Trincomalee naval base. This development represented Senanayake's worst fears since, in his view, it left Ceylon exposed to an Indian invasion. He thus demanded the Royal Navy maintain a visible presence at Trincomalee. Colombo also insisted Katunayake be strengthened since most RAF aircraft had recently been transferred to Hong Kong and Malaya where the Communist threat was deemed more imminent.³⁷ Gordon Walker, now Commonwealth Secretary, however, was deeply frustrated with what he saw as Senanayake's attempt to prevent a reduction in Britain's military presence without Ceylon bearing a greater share of the island's defence bill. He thus wrote a strongly-worded message to the Ceylonese Prime Minister expressing these views. But Senanayake responded with his standard 'strategic manoeuvre': Ceylon was only under threat due to the British presence and could not afford to spend more on defence.³⁸

As a result, Gordon Walker decided to visit Ceylon to break the impasse. Before he arrived, though, the Korean War erupted on 25 June 1950. With the risk of the Cold War turning hot the Commonwealth Secretary's trip took on 'very high importance'.³⁹ Yet for Senanayake the Korean War represented an opportunity. He openly supported the UN's attempts to repel the Soviet-backed North Korean invasion and claimed Moscow had similar aggressive designs on Ceylon.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in a memorandum titled 'Defence of Ceylon – Need for Aid' produced for Gordon Walker's visit Senanayake made his boldest bid for assistance, emphasising the danger Ceylon faced with the spread of the Cold War in Asia and criticising Britain's 'inappropriate and seriously inadequate' Appreciation. He thus called for an intensive assistance programme to strengthen Ceylon's forces to defend the island and assist in the defence of the Indian Ocean. Gordon Walker, however, dismissed the memorandum out-of-hand. He told Senanayake Ceylon was not an immediate Soviet target while an Indian invasion was 'so improbable that it could not be taken into account'. Gordon Walker left Ceylon shortly afterwards believing 'the position is now pretty clear between us'.⁴¹

Nonetheless, once back in London Gordon Walker was informed Senanayake was not prepared to conclude the defence negotiations until his request for assistance had been fully considered. The Commonwealth Secretary, accordingly, informed Attlee that the Ceylon government was not taking responsibility for the burdens of independence and was trying to take advantage of Britain to foot its defence bill. Attlee then informed Senanayake that Britain

could not help build-up Ceylon's forces until Ceylon agreed to purchase, and then make available for as long as was necessary, all the facilities on the island desired by the British military.⁴² Senanayake, however, refused to contemplate a new defence agreement and argued Britain was seeking to exploit Ceylon's weak position and goodwill. Gordon Walker was very disappointed with this response and thought it took the negotiations back 'to first principles'. Gordon Walker and Emanuel Shinwell, the new Minister of Defence, also concluded that the choice was either giving Ceylon 'a military guarantee in fairly precise terms' or 'put up the money ourselves for the bases or make a substantial contribution to the build-up of Ceylon's forces'. They ruled out the first option and so accepted 'some financial concession will have to be made'.⁴³

In consequence, on 1 January 1951 tense negotiations commenced in London with Senanayake present for a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting discussing the dire situation in Korea. The Ceylonese Prime Minister claimed that, 'The United Kingdom was making a convenience of Ceylon and was leaving Ceylon to shift for itself'. Shinwell responded that the bases were essential to Britain's strategy but only needed to be ready to be 'brought quickly into use in an emergency'. He added: 'It would be a gross waste of money and equipment to have the bases brought fully up to strength and kept idle'. Senanayake, however, insisted Ceylon could not afford to buy the land on which the bases were built as well as build-up its forces to protect and maintain these facilities while the British withdrew. Gordon Walker, accordingly, proposed that if Ceylon would buy the land Britain would cover the costs of equipping and training the Ceylonese forces. Notably, Senanayake indicated in the affirmative.⁴⁴ As such, with a breakthrough in sight, the Admiralty revealed it was willing to train the Ceylon Navy although it opposed loaning a frigate to Ceylon – as Senanayake desired – since the Royal Navy had none to spare. Additionally, the War Office stated it could provide the Ceylon Army with greater training as well as small arms sufficient for an additional infantry battalion. Lastly, the Air Ministry stressed the RAF would train and supply the first Ceylon Air Force squadron but could not provide the latest jet aircraft since this was sorely needed by Britain. Senanayake appeared to react positively and the British government swiftly produced a draft defence agreement incorporating these points.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, just as the negotiations finally appeared to be bearing fruit Goonetilleke revealed that due to domestic political opposition Ceylon could not sign any new agreement. His government also demanded a much more comprehensive defence scheme with Britain supplying the Ceylon Navy with two destroyers, one frigate, twelve minesweepers, and six seaward defence boats; the Ceylon Army with equipment for one battalion group and two anti-aircraft regiments; and the Ceylon Air Force with aircraft for two regular and one auxiliary fighter squadrons.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, the Chiefs of Staff stated that these demands were far in excess of Ceylon's defence needs

and could only be met by diverting resources away from higher priority areas. Still, Shinwell and Gordon Walker argued that in the current international crisis 'temporary sacrifice' should be made and called for the military services to reconsider their position. Considerably more detailed plans were thus formulated for the expansion of Ceylon's forces over an extended three to four-year period as Ceylon purchased the bases.⁴⁷ Even so, Senanayake rejected these proposals on the grounds that the Ceylonese Parliament would never 'vote money' to pay for the British presence on the island. Instead, he insisted Ceylon would slowly pay to build-up its own forces so they could eventually provide local defence. In the meantime British forces would be permitted to continue using the facilities on the island 'in the mutual interest' of Commonwealth defence.

The draft defence agreement thus appeared dead in the water. But before Senanayake left London Shinwell proposed that if Ceylon paid approximately £800,000 for the land on which the bases were built, Britain would make available free of charge equipment equalling that amount. Still, Goonetilleke continued to press the Ministry of Defence to provide free of charge all the equipment his country required.⁴⁸ Furthermore, on his return to Colombo Senanayake stressed he desired no replacement for the 1947 Defence Agreement since its vague terms worked well for Ceylon. Clearly, the Ceylonese Prime Minister was confident from his discussions in London that British forces would not completely withdraw leaving Ceylon exposed to an Indian attack. As such, there was no need for his government to pay for the land the bases were built on or to enter into any binding commitments that could be politically damaging to him. Senanayake thus preferred to leave the negotiations in suspense.⁴⁹ Yet Shinwell and Gordon Walker remained desperate to secure British tenure at the bases so the facilities could be modernised to meet the new Cold War challenges. In a final attempt to resuscitate the talks, therefore, Attlee wrote personally to Senanayake defending his government's proposals and calling on Ceylon to accept the draft defence agreement as the basis for continued negotiations.⁵⁰ The Ceylonese Prime Minister, however, completely ignored this letter.

Evidently, the defence negotiations had reached their lowest ebb to date with neither side willing to compromise. Over the following six months very little was achieved and in the October 1951 general election the Labour government was narrowly defeated by Winston Churchill's Conservatives. After three and a half years of difficult discussions practically no progress had been made in terms of implementing the 1947 Defence Agreement. In the Cold War context, London continued to recognise the strategic importance of the bases on Ceylon. But with limited funds available the Labour government had expected Colombo to contribute more to the island's defence costs while the British military had been forced to prioritise other areas at greater risk. Colombo, in contrast, desired a strong British military presence on the island

principally to deter Indian domination although Senanayake was willing to use anti-Soviet rhetoric when it suited him. Even so, Ceylon was unable economically to contribute towards the costs of maintaining the British bases or politically to agree to arrangements that compromised Ceylon's sovereignty.

The Conservatives, Dudley Senanayake, Sir John Kotelawala, and Impasse, 1952–56

D. S. Senanayake evidently hoped to utilise the Conservative victory to attain the military support he had failed to get from the Labour government. In March 1952 the Ceylonese Prime Minister requested Britain provide it with considerable additional materiel, including small arms, a number of naval vessels, and light aircraft.⁵¹ A week later, however, Senanayake tragically died in a horse-riding accident. The removal within a few short months of both the Attlee government and Ceylon's 'Father of the Nation' ushered in a new, less dynamic period in the defence negotiations. The Churchill government – more concerned with Anglo-American relations and seeking to resolve the Cold War – had far less interest in relations with Ceylon than the Labour government that had granted independence to the island state. It thus quickly tired of the defence negotiations. At the same time, the two Ceylonese UNP prime ministers who succeeded D. S. Senanayake – first his son Dudley Senanayake and then his protégé and distant relative Sir John Kotelawala – became embroiled in numerous domestic and foreign policy disputes. In these circumstances, these two prime ministers were largely content to continue the policy D. S. Senanayake had adopted soon before his death: to let the talks drift while the 1947 Defence Agreement remained in place.

In March 1952 Dudley Senanayake had been appointed to replace his father despite having little desire at the time for high office and lacking Kotelawala's experience and prestige. Yet, with Governor-General Lord Soulbury, the press and public rallying behind him out of respect for his father, Dudley, as he was generally known, accepted the premiership and Kotelawala grudgingly conceded.⁵² But in terms of foreign affairs, the new Ceylonese Prime Minister was especially unproven and reverted to the norm, seeking the closest relations with Britain.⁵³ Nevertheless, as an election year unfolded in Ceylon, the Defence Agreement again came under severe scrutiny with opposition Marxist and radical nationalist parties resuming their accusations regarding the existence of 'secret agreements' and the continued British 'military occupation' of the island. As such, Colombo was more opposed than ever to purchasing the land on which British bases were built. Instead, Dudley Senanayake simply pushed his father's last proposal for additional British military materiel. The Conservative Commonwealth Secretary, Lord Salisbury, however, replied that impoverished Britain had its own supply issues and it would take time to fulfil these orders.⁵⁴

The UNP's sweeping victory in the May 1952 general election then appeared to create an opening. Riding on the wave of emotion caused by the elder Senanayake's death, the UNP won 54 of the 95 seats. As such, Dudley seemed to have a stronger mandate to govern than his father. This fact was recognised by Salisbury who in a long Cabinet memorandum suggested practical solutions to issues currently delaying the defence negotiations. For example, regarding the relocation of a Royal Navy wireless station from Colombo to make way for low cost housing, Salisbury proposed that this be postponed for two years to give the government time to raise the £2 million needed. In addition, Salisbury claimed it would be 'morally difficult' not to loan one frigate to Ceylon since Britain had recently lent three frigates to India. But Salisbury thought this deal should be part of the £800,000 'gift' to Ceylon to acquire lands. The Commonwealth Secretary hoped these measures would convince Colombo to go further than providing oral assurances securing Britain's tenure at the bases. Still, he was prepared to wait given the current Ceylonese government was unlikely to throw British forces out of the bases. Crucially, Churchill and the Cabinet agreed no fresh attempt was necessary at present to establish new military arrangements.⁵⁵

Moreover, when Dudley attended his first Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting it became clear he was not prepared to go any further than his father since anti-Defence Agreement sentiment was growing in Ceylon. Discussions in London thus focused solely on the transfer of the wireless station and the frigate loan.⁵⁶ Subsequently, while these relatively minor issues continued to rumble on, no further significant negotiations on the Defence Agreement took place during Dudley's brief premiership. On one hand, this was due to the Conservative government's acceptance of the *status quo*. On the other hand, Dudley's myriad problems pushed this issue into the background. To begin with, in early 1952 the US Joint Chiefs of Staff became interested in Ceylon – with the Communist threat in Southeast Asia apparently increasing – desiring American military facilities on the island. Nonetheless, in August 1952 the Joint Chiefs concluded that for political reasons, both at home and in Ceylon, the time was not propitious to pursue its growing list of military requirements.⁵⁷ Behind this *volte face* was Colombo's decision to sell rubber to Beijing in exchange for rice despite a UN embargo on trading strategic goods with China during the Korean War. Dudley Senanayake had reluctantly taken this controversial course since Ceylon's natural rubber sales to the United States had plummeted with the development of cheaper synthetic rubber. Simultaneously, the price of rice produced in war-torn Burma, Ceylon's traditional supplier, had massively increased. The Ceylonese government, therefore, could not raise enough money to buy rice and fears mounted over food shortages and growing civil unrest.⁵⁸ Still, the Truman administration condemned Ceylon for trading with China while refusing to provide rice to Ceylon at a cheaper rate.⁵⁹ Relations with India also deteriorated over this issue since Nehru accused

Colombo of forcing Indian Tamils to leave Ceylon by providing them with smaller rice rations than Ceylonese citizens.⁶⁰

In October 1953 Dudley resigned under stress following his decision to impose a State of Emergency to crack down on rice riots and a general strike – or *hartal* – organised by Marxist trade unions. During this crisis, Colombo had even asked if British forces would intervene to maintain law and order but the British government made clear the Defence Agreement did not apply to internal security.⁶¹ In the meantime, Kotelawala was swiftly appointed Ceylon's new Prime Minister. Lord Swinton, now the Commonwealth Secretary, welcomed this decision believing Kotelawala had 'lots of guts' and was 'a firm hand on the reins' compared to his predecessor.⁶² Furthermore, in terms of external affairs Kotelawala initially appeared even more pro-British than the Senanayakes having reached the highest rank of Colonel in the Ceylonese Defence Force and was passionate about British cultural practices, particularly sport. Consequently, Kotelawala had informed Swinton that Ceylon's security depended on Britain, with regards to both 'the Russian menace' and India 'if anything happened to Nehru'. He even stated that, 'it was vital that our [British] installations and establishments should always remain in Ceylon; the more British warships could visit Ceylon the better it would be'.⁶³ Clearly, the new Ceylonese prime minister believed the Defence Agreement served 'in the mutual interest'.

In spite of these omens, though, problems continued once negotiations renewed over specific issues. For instance, Swinton had written directly to Kotelawala insisting that a confidential agreement be formed confirming the Royal Navy's indefinite right to utilise its wireless station given its centrality to Commonwealth defence.⁶⁴ The Ceylonese Prime Minister, however, did not respond for three months and, even then, purchased the land Britain needed for the new wireless station but refused to grant permanent security of tenure at this facility. Swinton thus grudgingly accepted these terms so that construction could begin.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Kotelawala increasingly adopted an ambiguous position regarding the Defence Agreement. In September 1954 the Ceylonese Prime Minister defended the British bases in the House of Representatives, relating this to the inherent threat posed by India. Yet Kotelawala, evidently affected by increasing domestic criticism of the British military presence, stated that British forces could be asked to withdraw at any time. Similarly, after returning from the March 1955 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting, Kotelawala told the Ceylonese press that the bases could not be used by Britain in wartime against Ceylon's will.⁶⁶

After this statement, the British Defence Coordination Committee, Far East, accepted that a new defence agreement securing tenure at the military bases in Ceylon was impossible since the Ceylonese government preferred the *ad hoc* nature of the 1947 Defence Agreement. Significantly, this report recommended that Britain should continue to assume in a global war that it would have use of

Trincomalee. Given the vital importance of air power in modern warfare, however, the report pressed for the construction of a new airbase in the Maldives so that the RAF could withdraw from Katunayake while maintaining secure air routes to East Asia and Australasia. Still, in January 1956 the Air Ministry thought construction of a new air base in the Maldives was neither practical nor politically feasible.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, by this time clearly both Colombo and London, while still believing that the Defence Agreement served ‘in the mutual interest’, were seeking ways to minimise its importance.

Underlying Kotelawala’s position was his contentious multi-dimensional foreign policy. Vijaya Samaraweera and Wilson both argue that Kotelawala’s principal objective was to place Ceylon firmly in the US Cold War camp.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Ceylonese Prime Minister did enter into negotiations with Washington to establish a Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation and to receive US economic aid. Kotelawala even met President Dwight Eisenhower at the White House in late 1954. Yet, as long as Colombo refused to end its rice-rubber trade agreement with Beijing, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to make an exception to the Battle Act preventing the United States from providing aid to countries assisting the ‘enemy’.⁶⁹ In contrast, J. L. Fernando, G. C. Mendis and L. M. Ratnapalan argue that Kotelawala was a pragmatist whose priority was steering a middle course in the Cold War.⁷⁰ In fact, in his very first statement on foreign affairs, Kotelawala stated that Ceylon would not join any power bloc but wanted alliances with its Asian neighbours.⁷¹ Kotelawala also resisted American and British pressure to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), stating that Ceylon wanted to be the ‘Switzerland of the Orient’.⁷² In addition, Kotelawala improved relations with India by signing the Delhi Agreement with Nehru agreeing to the repatriation of Indian Tamils.⁷³ This policy of regionalism then found its clearest expression when Kotelawala invited the leaders of India, Pakistan, Burma and Indonesia to meet in Colombo to discuss common issues. Kotelawala also actively participated in the follow-up 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in Indonesia. Nonetheless, the Ceylonese Prime Minister remained staunchly anti-Communist and caused rifts at Bandung by verbally attacking Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and insisting on resolutions denouncing ‘aggressive communism’ as well as Western imperialism.⁷⁴

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Suez, and Demise, 1956–1957

Nineteen fifty-six was the pivotal year for the Defence Agreement. While the impact of Solomon West Ridgway Dias (S. W. R. D.) Bandaranaike’s shock election victory on Ceylon’s domestic and foreign affairs remains contentious,⁷⁵ the new Ceylonese Prime Minister’s determination to, in his view, bring about Ceylon’s ‘full independence’ at the same time as pursuing a nonaligned

foreign policy served notice to the already much weakened Defence Agreement. Even so, Bandaranaike wanted to ensure the defence negotiations with Britain were brought to an amicable conclusion and the withdrawal of British forces caused the least disruption to his country. Similarly, while the Suez Crisis has too commonly been seen as the death knell of British imperial power, it did have an immediate impact on Britain's policy towards Ceylon. By late 1956 the geostrategic imperative of retaining British bases on Ceylon for the defence of the Empire-Commonwealth had evaporated and neither the Anthony Eden nor the Harold Macmillan governments proved willing to fight to preserve the alliance with Colombo. The Conservatives thus desired a rapid and cost-effective military withdrawal from Ceylon. Still, even with both governments viewing the Defence Agreement as no longer serving 'in the mutual interest', the final stage of negotiations was fraught.

British High Commissioner Sir Cecil Syers had predicted a resounding UNP victory in the April 1956 general election since Kotelawala was Ceylon's 'great man' who was 'making Ceylon's name known on the world stage'.⁷⁶ But warning signs were already present. Kotelawala's confused foreign policy had gained many critics, even leading to the resignation of his Minister of Commerce, Dudley's cousin R. G. Senanayake. Few, however, foresaw the surge in popularity of Bandaranaike's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or People's United Front. The MEP was an unlikely coalition. Bandaranaike was an aristocrat, raised a Christian, and educated at Oxford University, before converting to Buddhism and becoming a Sinhalese-nationalist with socialist leanings. Still, he had joined with his rival D. S. Senanayake to form the UNP and had subsequently served as Leader of the House. Yet Bandaranaike had become frustrated by the UNP's conservative foreign and economic policies and split from it in 1951, forming the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).⁷⁷ After a poor performance in the 1952 general election, though, the SLFP sought partners in 1956, joining with a number of radical Sinhalese-nationalist and Marxist parties. At the general election, therefore, the MEP won 51 of the 95 seats while the UNP collapsed to just eight seats. Various factors led to this result, most importantly the low standard of living faced by ordinary Ceylonese that the UNP had failed to relieve as well as the rise of Buddhist nationalism stoked up by celebrations of Buddha's 2500th birthday and the SLFP's 'Sinhala Only' language policy relegating English and Tamil to unofficial status.⁷⁸

Another issue that helped unite the MEP's disparate wings while ringing true with the electorate was its foreign policy platform of, 'steering clear of involvement with power-blocs and by the establishment of friendly relations with all countries'. In particular, Bandaranaike desired good relations with India and wished to emulate Nehru's policy of establishing relations with both Cold War camps while playing them off against each other to secure maximum assistance. More specifically, the MEP's 1956 Joint Programme also stated

that, 'no bases can be permitted in our country to any foreign power, and all foreign troops must be immediately withdrawn from our country'.⁷⁹ Interestingly, Bandaranaike had not criticised the Defence Agreement when a UNP Cabinet member. But in opposition he had claimed that the agreement dragged Ceylon into the Cold War and secret agreements existed. In the 1956 election Bandaranaike thus argued that the Defence Agreement had to be abrogated for Ceylon to finally win 'complete sovereignty'.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the latest Commonwealth Secretary, Lord Home, was confident Bandaranaike was a moderate who, once the realities of government had set in, would permit British forces to access the bases once they had been formally transferred to Ceylon. Home's principal worry, though, was Bandaranaike's neutralism since if a crisis erupted in Asia Colombo could block British use of the military facilities in Ceylon under the current Defence Agreement. Syers also felt Bandaranaike would be pragmatic and would agree to compensate Britain for its facilities and maintain the bases after British forces withdrew. Syers believed, therefore, a 'satisfactory agreement, including a phased withdrawal was achievable'. At the same time, Syers did warn any attempt to pressure Bandaranaike to change policy on the bases 'can only do harm'.⁸¹ In addition, the Chiefs of Staff began re-examining the strategic importance of Ceylon. Before the Suez Crisis had even begun the Chiefs concluded that Trincomalee was too expensive to run and an anachronism in the thermo-nuclear age when one weapon could destroy the entire naval base. Yet Katunayake was still deemed a vital RAF staging post and the telecommunications facilities on the island had to be preserved. The Chiefs' report, however, emphasised the need to consider alternatives if British forces left Ceylon, especially a new air base in the Maldives.⁸²

Meanwhile, Bandaranaike's position regarding the Defence Agreement became increasingly ambiguous. He used the Queen's Speech at the opening of the new Parliament to announce an investigation into any secret agreements entered into by the UNP. But within a week, after conversations with Goonetilleke, now Ceylon's Governor-General, Bandaranaike admitted that no secret clauses existed.⁸³ He also told the press that, following conversations with First Sea Lord Admiral Mountbatten, he did not foresee any difficulties if Ceylon asked Britain to quit its bases. In fact, Mountbatten had simply urged Bandaranaike to carefully consider his objectives before the upcoming Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting. In response, the Ceylonese Prime Minister had insisted that if Ceylon was to be 'the Switzerland of the East' the 'indefinite continuance' of the 'obvious anomaly' of foreign bases in its territory had to be resolved. Mountbatten had then warned Bandaranaike Ceylon would have to spend more on her own defence and deal with the approximately 60,000 Ceylonese who depended on the bases for their livelihoods.⁸⁴ Even so, Bandaranaike told the press that, 'occupation of these bases was fundamentally opposed to all of his political thinking and to his entire conception of world

affairs'. Furthermore, he wanted Ceylon to build-up its own forces and assume control of the bases.⁸⁵

Nonetheless, the Ceylonese Prime Minister's public statements were markedly different from the views espoused by his own Ministry of External Affairs and Defence. Before Bandaranaike left for his first Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting the Ministry produced a series of memoranda outlining Ceylon's foreign policy to date, including a memorandum on the possible evacuation of the British bases. This document reiterated that Ceylon had the right to order British forces to withdraw if the Defence Agreement was not 'in the mutual interest' and dismissed the view that the presence of British forces negated Ceylon's sovereignty. The memorandum warned, moreover, that if British forces left the island they would not likely return in a global war and Ceylon would come under pressure from the United States, the Soviet Union and India given its strategic position. Additionally, Ceylon would have to compensate the British, bear the costs of running the bases, and lose the employment benefits associated with the bases. The memorandum thus proposed the military installations be maintained jointly but formal control transferred to Ceylon.⁸⁶

When in London in June 1956, therefore, Bandaranaike pursued precisely these recommendations with Home and Minister of Defence Sir Walter Monckton. The Ceylonese Prime Minister also hoped Britain would provide further assistance to expand Ceylon's armed forces. While Home and Monckton did tell Bandaranaike that Britain needed more concrete guarantees over which facilities the British could use and for how long, they stressed to the Cabinet that if further pressure was added by breaking off negotiations Bandaranaike would likely adopt a harder position. Home and Monckton thus felt it better to concede the point of principal regarding Ceylon's control of the bases so Britain would retain Bandaranaike's goodwill upon which it relied to retain access to the facilities it needed. Crucially, Eden agreed and a joint communiqué was issued announcing that Britain would transfer the bases to Ceylon; Colombo would continue to make available facilities to British forces; Britain would help expand Ceylon's forces; and final arrangements would be settled in London at an early date.⁸⁷

Despite clearly compromising in London, on his return home Bandaranaike claimed victory since he had secured recognition of Ceylon's absolute right to the bases and the withdrawal of ninety per cent of British forces. He also described the remaining facilities accorded to the British as a 'minor inconvenience'. In addition, Bandaranaike stressed some extra expenditure to build-up Ceylon's forces was a necessary concomitant of Ceylon's independence and neutral foreign policy. Norman Costar, the Acting British High Commissioner, thus concluded that Bandaranaike had to publicly appease both his anti-British Marxists colleagues as well as his Buddhist monk supporters who feared Britain's withdrawal left Ceylon exposed to Indian attack.⁸⁸ As such,

Bandaranaike's pronouncements were ignored by the Conservative government that promptly produced a statement of its requirements, including continued overflying, landing and staging facilities at Katunayake; transit facilities at the flying boat base at China Bay near Trincomalee; use of wireless and relay stations; and access to various storage depots. The statement also demanded a 'fair price' for any of the facilities Ceylon desired that Britain no longer wished to use. Additionally, the British government requested detailed requirements for the expansion of the Ceylonese forces.⁸⁹

Before any real progress was made on this statement, however, the Suez Crisis erupted on 26 July 1956. Bandanaraike was extremely critical of Eden's antagonistic response to Egypt's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal. Moreover, as the crisis intensified Colombo made abundantly clear that the bases in Ceylon could not be used by the British in the event of a war with Egypt. He even warned that if the bases were used Ceylon would seize control of them. As a result, Banaranaike was now publicly committed to the policy that in wartime Britain could only use the bases at the discretion of the Ceylonese government. In consequence, Costar concluded, with Colombo committed to nonalignment, Britain would not be able to use the bases 'except perhaps in a war sponsored by the United Nations'. Still, while London agreed that it would only use the bases in relation to Suez following consultation with Colombo, it was careful not to make this commitment in all emergencies.⁹⁰ When the Anglo-French-Israeli military intervention in Egypt did then finally occur in late October 1956, Ceylon – which had become a UN member in 1955 – openly attacked this action in the General Assembly. Colombo even offered to contribute an infantry company to the United Nations Emergency Force formed to peacefully end the conflict. What is more, much to Eden's ire, Banadaranaiké failed to condemn the Soviet Union's simultaneous invasion of Hungary.⁹¹

The Suez Crisis, including Eden's humiliating decision to withdraw under US economic pressure, shattered Britain's reputation in Ceylon and solidified Colombo's shift to the Afro-Asian camp.⁹² The Chiefs of Staff recognised this fact early and began re-examining Britain's defence strategy. The Chiefs, like Costar, concluded that Britain could no longer count on using the Ceylon facilities in any future war. Consequently, they called for an airbase and signals facilities to be constructed at Gan in the Maldives. Secretary of State for Air Nigel Birch concurred but wanted to proceed slowly since the Maldives government had not yet agreed to the construction of a new air base and it would take the RAF three to five years to withdraw from Katunayake. Staging and overflying rights in Ceylon were thus deemed essential. Mountbatten also called for alternative naval bases to be built elsewhere and First Lord of the Admiralty Lord Hailsham agreed that the naval bases in Ceylon 'had become strategically futile and uneconomic', recommending a phased withdrawal while Britain constructed new facilities over three to four years. Home and Foreign Secretary

Selwyn Lloyd thus informed the beleaguered Eden that 'total withdrawal' was the only course after Suez.⁹³

As a result, in November and December 1956, with Bandaranaike travelling through London either side of the UN debates on Suez, negotiations commenced to terminate the Defence Agreement. These talks got off to an inauspicious start with the Ceylonese delegation protesting that three Royal Navy vessels that had refuelled at Trincomalee had subsequently been used in the Suez conflict. Eden explained to Bandaranaike that these vessels either did not participate in the invasion of Egypt or only did so months after leaving Ceylon but the accusations refused to die down in Ceylon.⁹⁴ In this climate Bandaranaike gave Eden the choice that British forces could either be withdrawn completely within two to three years or remain indefinitely on the condition Ceylon would control the bases and have the right to deny their use any time it saw fit. In response, Home feigned surprise that Bandaranaike had dropped his earlier compromise proposal and protested that Britain had not had time to consider this new policy. Evidently, the Conservative government wanted to stall while it recovered from Suez. Bandaranaike appeared somewhat sympathetic to this fact and agreed to give Britain time to respond. Home was particularly grateful for this understanding since, given events in Egypt, 'Two evacuations announced in one week wouldn't do!'. Still, before Bandaranaike left London the two governments agreed formal control of the British bases would be transferred in 1957 and negotiations to settle the arrangements for Britain's withdrawal would shortly commence in Ceylon.⁹⁵

Before this final round of talks got underway Eden resigned, ostensibly due to ill-health, and was replaced as by his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan. The new Prime Minister paid little direct attention to the Anglo-Ceylon defence discussions but clearly wanted these concluded swiftly and on good financial terms so that he could focus on the domestic and international fallout from Suez. Furthermore, in March 1957 Minister of Defence Duncan Sandys produced his famous White Paper radically altering Britain's defence strategy.⁹⁶ While a review of British strategy had been underway since 1955, the Suez Crisis, continuing economic difficulties, and technological advances had crystallised British thinking away from maintaining large conventional forces in preparation for a global war to a strategy of nuclear deterrence. While this White Paper made no specific mention of Ceylon, it implied that British bases across the globe were now too expensive and obsolete and should be rundown as quickly as practicable.⁹⁷ The Macmillan government, therefore, produced a memorandum stating that the Royal Navy only needed storage depots at Trincomalee and the RAF needed use of Katunayake and China Bay as well as wireless and signals facilities for three to five years. The RAF also still wanted to retain overflying and staging rights indefinitely. Lastly, the memorandum called for phased discharges of the 7000 Ceylonese employed at the bases to avoid labour unrest.⁹⁸ This document formed the

basis for the negotiations that commenced in Colombo in late March 1957. Over the following weeks agreements were reached relatively easily regarding the transfer of control of Trincomalee and Katunayake in late 1957 and for the British withdrawal to be completed within five years.

The critical sticking point, however, was the financial settlement. The Ceylonese Treasury stated that they were prepared to pay a 'fair price' for the facilities Ceylon's military would make use of in the future. Yet what assets Colombo desired, how the 'fair price' would be calculated, and the payment period envisaged, all proved contentious. After a series of fraught discussions between Bandaranaike and Syers, with Home pressing for better terms from London, it was eventually agreed Ceylon would pay £1.65 million over five annual payments during the withdrawal period. Notably, though, at each stage it was Bandaranaike who proved most willing to compromise to retain good relations with Britain.⁹⁹ In May 1957 negotiations then turned to finalising the language for the new arrangements and how and when these documents would be publicised. With all the substantive issues now resolved the two governments soon agreed to the wording of an exchange of letters, as well as a financial annex, outlining the withdrawal arrangements. The exchange of letters finally took place on 7 June 1957, superseding rather than abrogating the 1947 Defence Agreement.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The transfer of control of the Trincomalee and Katunayake bases took place as agreed on 15 October and 1 November 1957 respectively. This triggered the beginning of the British military withdrawal from Ceylon. In stark contrast to the preceding years of fraught negotiations, the British departure was uneventful and ended amicably long before the five year deadline with the Macmillan government eager to retrench from its overseas military commitments. Moreover, for Colombo the withdrawal of British forces quickly became a minor issue. Bandaranaike was determined to institute major social and economic reforms and catapult Ceylon to the forefront of the nonaligned movement. Yet he soon became preoccupied with the increasing ethnic unrest within his country. While Bandaranaike was a moderate Sinhalese-nationalist desperate to end British domination, many of his reforms, especially his 'Sinhala Only' policy, helped to unleash pent up tensions on the island. In June 1956 the first anti-Tamil riots occurred and were followed by more widespread and violent incidents in 1958. Ceylon's spiral towards civil war had begun.

Nevertheless, these subsequent events do not diminish the importance of the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement during its decade-long existence. Throughout the early Cold War London viewed the bases on Ceylon as strategically vital to the defence of the Empire-Commonwealth and was willing to guarantee the security of the island to maintain access to them. Yet with Britain's economic woes continuing long after the Second World War while the

Cold War spread and intensified, Ceylon became less of a priority. Furthermore, successive Labour and Conservative governments became frustrated with Colombo's refusal to grant it indefinite security of tenure at the bases and foot more of Ceylon's defence bill. The UNP governments, however, were content with the existing defence agreement since they realised Colombo did not have to make any significant concessions to prevent Britain abandoning Ceylon and leaving the island exposed to India. Even so, the two Senanayakes and Kotelawala protested when cash-strapped Britain sought to minimise its military commitment and failed to provide adequate supplies for Ceylon's forces. These problems came to a head in 1956 with Bandaranaike's election and the Suez Crisis. With both countries no longer believing the Defence Agreement served 'in the mutual interest' it was rapidly terminated despite a number of final complications. This came soon after the abrogation of the Anglo-Burmese Defence Agreement and the Anglo-Transjordan Treaty of Alliance suggesting the limited value of such military arrangements. Still, the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement was signed as early as October 1957 and Britain entered into alliances with other former colonies as decolonisation accelerated. Evidently, post-colonial defence agreements were still seen by London to have utility despite the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement having been both a symbol of goodwill and friction for a decade.

Notes

1. For traditional accounts of Ceylon's path to independence and early independence see, for example, Fernando, *Three Prime Ministers*; Jacob, *Sri Lanka*; Jennings and Tambiah, *Dominion of Ceylon*; Jeffries, *Ceylon*; Ludowyk, *Modern History of Ceylon*; Ludowyk, *Story of Ceylon*; Tresidder, *Ceylon*; and Wriggins, *Ceylon*.
2. de Silva, *British Documents*.
3. For more recent accounts of Ceylon's path to independence and early independence see, for example, Ashton, "Ceylon", 447–64; Gajameragedara, *Sri Lanka*; Kumarasingham, *A Political Legacy*; Kumarsingham, "The 'Tropical Dominions'", 242–45; Melegoda, *Three Prime Ministers*; Ratnapalan, "'Why Disgrace the Commonwealth?'" 288–305; de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*; de Silva, "Sri Lanka", 361–67; de Silva, "Sri Lanka in 1948", 591–98; de Silva, "'The Model Colony'", 77–88; de Silva, "The Transfer of Power", 433–36; and Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka*.
4. Ratnapalan, "Britain and the Politics", 541–65.
5. For references to the United Kingdom-Ceylon Defence Agreement in works focusing on Britain in the Cold War see, for example, Fieldhouse, "The Labour Governments", 92–96, 103, 116–17; Murfett, *In Jeopardy*, 3–7, 13, 26, 88; and Tanner, *A Strong Showing*, 130. Notably, the Defence Agreement is not mentioned at all in McGarr, *The Cold War*.
6. Letter Senanayake to Creech Jones, 28 Feb 1947, The National Archives (TNA), London, CO882/30.
7. Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 7 March 1947; and Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 22 March 1947, TNA, CO882/30.

8. Minute Creech Jones to Attlee, 22 March 1947; and Minute Attlee to Creech Jones, 27 March 1949, TNA, CO882/30.
9. Telegram Creech Jones to Moore, 1 April 1949; Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 4 April 1949, TNA, CO882/30.
10. 'Ceylon Constitution', Memorandum by Creech Jones, 29 April 1947; Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 1 May 1947, TNA, PREM8/726; and 'Ceylon Constitution', Memorandum by Creech Jones, 2 May 1947, TNA, CAB129/18.
11. 'Ceylon Constitution', Report by Chiefs of Staff, 5 May 1947, TNA, CAB129/18; and Cabinet Conclusions, 6 May 1947, TNA, CAB128/9.
12. 'Ceylon Constitution', Memorandum by Creech Jones, 1 June 1947, TNA, CAB129/19; Cabinet Conclusions, 3 June 1947, TNA, CAB128/10; Minute Attlee to Creech Jones, 6 June 1947, TNA, PREM8/726; Telegram Creech Jones to Moore, 6 June 1947; and Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 8 June 1947, TNA, CO882/30.
13. Minute Creech Jones to Attlee, 10 June 1947, TNA, CO882/30.
14. Letter Rowan to Edmonds, 10 June 1947; and Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 13 June 1947, TNA, CO882/30; 'Ceylon (Constitutional Development)', 18 June 1947, House of Commons, Volume 438, Hansard, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1947-06-18/debates/0681bbc5-ee1c-46fe-b120-f4303403b586/Ceylon \(ConstitutionalDevelopment\)?highlight=ceylon#contribution-a0bba58e-d3d8-41a2-81f5-88017a071429](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1947-06-18/debates/0681bbc5-ee1c-46fe-b120-f4303403b586/Ceylon%28ConstitutionalDevelopment%29?highlight=ceylon#contribution-a0bba58e-d3d8-41a2-81f5-88017a071429)
15. 'Ceylon Defence Requirements', Report Joint Planning Staff, 3 June 1947, TNA, DEFE6/2; Note of discussion with Moore and Goonetilleke, 15 July 1947; and Note of discussion between Creech Jones, Moore and Goonetilleke, 17 July 1947, TNA, CO537/2216.
16. 'Ceylon Constitution', Memorandum by Creech Jones, 21 July 1947; and India and Burma Committee Meeting, Ceylon Constitution, 28 July 1947, TNA, PREM8/726.
17. Telegram Creech Jones to Moore, 4 Oct 1947; and Telegram Moore to Jones, 29 Oct 1947, TNA, CO882/30.
18. Telegram Moore to Creech Jones, 11 Nov 1947, TNA, CO882/30.
19. Despatch Thorogood to Board of Trade, 21 Nov 1947, TNA, CO537/2224.
20. 26 Nov 1947 and 1 Dec 1947, Hansard, Volume 1, House of Representatives, Department of National Archives Sri Lanka (DNASL), Colombo.
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23. 'Ceylon', Memorandum by Gordon Walker, 17 March 1948, TNA, CAB129/26.
24. Note of meeting between Attlee, Goonetilleke and Gordon Walker, 17 Feb 1948, TNA, DO35/2400; and Minutes of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 18 March 1948, TNA, DEFE7/113.
25. Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 19 April 1948, TNA, DEFE4/12; Note by Parker, 20 April 1948; Letter Machtig to Hankinson, 15 May 1948, TNA, DO35/2401; and Note by Parker, 13 May 1948, TNA, DEFE7/117.

26. Note of conversation between Goonetilleke and Gordon Walker, 14 Feb 1948, TNA, DO35/2400; Telegram United Kingdom High Commissioner in Ceylon (UKHCC) to Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), 16 June 1948; CRO to UKHCC, 8 June 1948, TNA, DO35/2401; and 'Ceylon', Memorandum by Noel-Baker, 17 Aug 1948, TNA, CAB129/29.
27. Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka*, 275.
28. 'Ceylon and the World Situation', Memorandum by Senanayake, [date unknown], DNASL, RG179, Series 938; and 14 July 1949, Hansard, Volume 6, House of Representatives, DNASL.
29. Note of meeting at CRO, 26 Oct 1948; Note of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 27 Oct 1948, TNA, DO35/2402; Telegram CRO to UKHCC, 17 Jan 1949, TNA, DEFE7/821; and Telegram CRO to Acting UKHCC, 23 Feb 1949, TNA, DEFE7/822.
30. Letter Donaldson to Vaithianathan, 27 May 1949; and Letter Vaithianathan to Donaldson, 8 June 1949, TNA, DEFE7/118.
31. Samaraweera, "Foreign Policy", 350–51.
32. Note of meeting at CRO, 30 April 1949, TNA, DO35/2407.
33. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 7 June 1949; and Letter Noel-Baker to Alexander, 20 July 1949, TNA, DO35/2410.
34. Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 29 June 1949; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 8 July 1949; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 11 July 1949, TNA, DEFE4/22; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 18 July 1949; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 29 July 1949, TNA, DEFE4/23; and 'Appreciation of the Military Requirements in Ceylon', Memorandum for the Chiefs of Staff, 20 July 1949, TNA, DEFE5/15.
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36. Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 2 Sep 1949; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 12 Sep 1949, TNA, DEFE4/24; 'Defence of Ceylon', Memorandum for the Chiefs of Staff, 31 Aug 1949, TNA, DEFE5/15; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 5 Oct 1949, TNA, DEFE4/27; Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 30 Sep 1949, TNA, DEFE 5/16; and Letter Hankinson to Liesching, 5 Nov 1949, TNA, DEFE7/1738.
37. Telegram CRO to UKHCC, 4 Jan 1950; Letter Hankinson to Senanayake, 19 Jan 1950; Letter Senanayake to Hankinson, 23 Feb 1950, TNA, DEFE7/1738; Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 25 Feb 1950; and Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 19 April 1950, TNA, DO35/2419.
38. Telegram CRO to UKHCC, 6 June 1950; and Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 29 June 1950, TNA, DO35/2419.
39. Record of conversation between Gordon Walker and Goonetilleke, 22 June 1950, TNA, DO35/2415; and Telegram CRO to UKHCC, 27 June 1950, TNA, DO35/3266.
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43. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 14 Nov 1950; Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 1 Dec 1950; Telegram CRO to UKHCC, 7 Dec 1950, TNA, DO35/2423; and 'Ceylon Defence

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44. Note of meeting with Senanayake, 1 Jan 1951, TNA, DO35/2427.
 45. Record of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 2 Jan 1951, TNA, DEFE7/1740; Record of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 3 Jan 1951; Draft Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Ceylon Relating to Defence, 6 Jan 1951, TNA, DO35/2427; and Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 5 Jan 1951, TNA, DEFE4/39.
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 48. Record of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 17 Jan 1951; and Record of meeting at Ministry of Defence, 19 Jan 1951, TNA, DO35/2427.
 49. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 23 Jan 1951, TNA, DO35/2427.
 50. 'Ceylon Defence', Memorandum by Shinwell and Gordon Walker, 14 April 1951, TNA, DEFE11/157; and Letter Attlee to Senanayake, 23 April 1951, DO35/2428.
 51. Letter Metcalf to Sykes, 14 March 1952, TNA, DO35/2428.
 52. Manor, "Breaching a Precedent", 427–30; Fernando, *Three Prime Ministers*, 52.
 53. Ratnapalan, "Britain and the Politics", 549–50; and Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka*, 267.
 54. Letter Metcalf to Sykes, 23 May 1952; and Record of conversation between Salisbury and Wijeyeratne, 29 May 1952, TNA, DO35/2428.
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 59. Ratnapalan, "Britain and the Politics", 551; Samaraweera, "Foreign Policy", 340; Tredder, *Ceylon*, 144–45; Wriggins, *Ceylon*, 405–10.
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 66. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 17 Sep 1954, TNA, DO35/5288; Letter Syers to Crookshank, 30 Sep 1954, TNA, DO35/8913; and Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 5 March 1955, TNA, DO35/5289.
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 72. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 17 Sep 1954, TNA, DO35/5288.
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 75. Ratnapalan, "Britain and the Politics", 543.
 76. Letter Syers to Home, 1 March 1956, TNA, DO35/5192.
 77. Fernando, *Three Prime Ministers*, 107–08; Kodikara, "Major Trends", 1122; Ratnapalan, "Britain and the Politics", 551–53; de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, 613–14; Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka*, 298–99; Wriggins, *Ceylon*, 331–32.
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 88. Telegram UKHCC to CRO, 6 July 1956, TNA, DO35/5289; Letter Costar to Home, 30 Oct 1956, TNA, PREM11/3231.

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90. Telegram Acting UKHCC to CRO, 25 Sep 1956; Letter Costar to CRO, 9 Oct 1956; Telegram CRO to Acting UKHCC, 12 Oct 1956, TNA, DEFE7/2324; and Letter Costar to Home, 1 Oct 1956, TNA, DO35/5363.
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Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the British International History Group Annual Conference 2015, University of Canterbury, the symposium 'Peril and Progress: International History since the First World War' at York St John University in June 2015, and the York St John University School of Humanities Research Seminar in December 2018. I would like to thank those present at these events for their constructive comments and criticisms. I would also like to thank the archivists at the United Kingdom National Archives and Department of National Archives of Sri Lanka for their help and advice.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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