

Welcome Remarks by the Executive Director of LKI

Inauguration of the 'LKI Foreign Policy Forum'

9 August, 2023

Hon. Minister,

Hon. State Minister,

Acting Foreign Secretary,

Members of the Board of Management,

Excellencies,

Respected Panelists and

Distinguished Guests,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the launch of this flagship 'LKI Foreign Policy Forum'. This occasion marks the beginning of a new platform dedicated to informed discussion of a contemporary issue of foreign policy relevance, as we collectively strive to advance the dialogue on Sri Lanka foreign policy, to build 'common ground' and evolve a 'Sri Lankan perspective' on issues in a rapidly changing world.

My colleagues and I are honoured that Hon. M. U. M. Ali Sabry, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is also the Chairman of LKI, agreed to deliver the inaugural address as we launch this series. We are also honoured to have our State Minister Hon. Tharaka Balasuriya, as well as the Acting Foreign Secretary grace this occasion, and we warmly welcome all of you to this event.

I am deeply appreciative of the encouragement given by the Hon. Minister, the Hon. State Minister, the Foreign Secretary and members of the Board of Management of the LKI towards the several initiatives we have embarked upon, since I assumed duties at LKI 7 weeks ago. Madam Suganthie Kadirgamar who was unable to attend today's event, has asked me to convey to you her greetings and her best wishes for the programme.

I also want to especially welcome my predecessors who served as Executive Directors – Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne, and Dr. Laksiri Mendis, who are with us today, as well as Ambassador Daneshan Cassie Chetty, Mr. Asanga Abeygoonesekera and Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, for their service to this institute.

I am also thankful to our panellists Ambassador Mr. H. M. G. S. Palihakkara, Dr. Harinda Vidanage, Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, and Dr. Jehan Perera, for agreeing to participate in this panel discussion today.

It is fitting that the inaugural session of the ‘LKI Foreign Policy Forum’ is being held to coincide with the 18th death anniversary of the Late Hon. Lakshman Kadirgamar which falls on Saturday (12 August 2023). While the Late Minister left an indelible legacy through his actions in protecting Sri Lanka’s national interest with distinction both here and abroad – and in that quest paid the supreme sacrifice, the Sri Lanka Institute of Strategic Studies which he initiated in year 2000, later to be re-named the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI) in 2006, was a key element of his vision to build an institution that could contribute towards the furtherance of Sri Lanka foreign policy in a sustainable manner. Having had the privilege of serving as Director/Publicity and Spokesman from 1995-2000 under the Late Minister, I have experienced first-hand how much he valued informed debate and collective decision making, something he trusted an institute of this nature would contribute towards, beyond his time.

That is the challenge he left us, which my colleagues and I are committed to fulfil, to the best of our ability.

In that task, the ‘LKI Foreign Policy Forum’ we launch today will not be a one-off event. It is a process, we hope to conduct on a quarterly basis, interspersed with regular small group interactions, along with other LKI flagship projects we envision – a bi-annual peer reviewed ‘LKI Foreign Policy Journal’, a bi-annual ‘LKI International Cultural Event’, an annual ‘LKI Research Conference’, and a more consistent and regular ‘LKI Perspective’ – a series of contributions that would be made available in the public domain. This naturally is in addition to the Lakshman Kadirgamar Memorial Oration which takes place each year.

We are also putting in place a ‘LKI Research Programme’, where in addition to ‘Global Governance’ and ‘Global Economy’ for which the LKI has had 2 Research Fellows from previous

times, with the recent recruitment of 4 Research Assistants, and several Research Interns, we will be also extending the scope of our research to include ‘Global Peace & Security’ and ‘Global Relations’. LKI will additionally draw together the relevant experts from the diplomatic, academic, business, civil society, arts and media communities, to build a comprehensive network that could contribute to achieving specific objectives identified for operation under these 4 pillars.

At the same time, the LKI will provide policy relevant research inputs and assist in projects initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We will also continue to collaborate with foreign Missions and Agencies in Sri Lanka, network with local and foreign think tanks, and seek to expand our research outreach within the region and beyond.

It has been a difficult choice as to whom to invite for an event of this nature – Do we just go for numbers? Do we want status? What do we target? We have opted to invite individuals based on their relevance to the programme of the LKI. Hence our audience today is drawn from what I would like to refer to as the ‘foreign policy concerned community’ in Sri Lanka. We have also made a special effort to involve young students and professionals from foreign policy related academic programmes. Going forward, the LKI will also endeavour to reach out to the vernacular speaking sections of our population.

Our rationalization in taking this overarching approach is that all these categories are Ambassadors for Sri Lanka and have a role to play in leveraging and furthering Sri Lanka’s foreign policy interests. We do so in the belief that if a community is abreast of the structures, processes, and dynamics of foreign policy relevant issues, they will be in a better position to make sense of the ‘events’ that take place from time to time, in an informed, rational, and objective manner. We believe that this would contribute to building greater ‘common ground’ on foreign policy, away from the polarized debates that often take an ‘either....or’ orientation.

Distinguished guests, as we embark on this journey, I urge you to actively participate, contribute to and engage with the work of the LKI. Your expertise, insights and ideas will be invaluable as we move forward.

Thank you.