



International Cooperation for the Protection of the Environment

By Erik Solheim

28 March 2023

Mr. President, good afternoon, Colombo, it's such a privilege to be asked to speak to such a distinguished audience of key Sri Lankans but also many foreign envoys and on topics which are so close to my heart and I really love this name, Geopolitical Cartographer, because we cannot solve any problem in the world unless we take the geopolitics into account and of course the map and geography is central to everything. And Sri Lankan location right in the middle of the Indian Ocean, this Ocean is 20% of the surface of global oceans and it's right in the most fast-growing part of the world so Sri Lanka has a huge role to play in the years to come and look, this is a Nation with no enemies, no one anywhere in the world hates Sri Lanka, people are respectful to Sri Lanka, they like this Nation and you can play a role in making bridges in the world because we need a lot more bridges and a lot fewer walls in this world.

I just came here from Chennai and all over Chennai there was a poster of Prime Minister Modi which I did love, it said, I mean it's the G20 Presidency of India, it said that if we do want to solve problems like terrorism, climate change, or pandemics, we need to work together in one world. It's a very simple message but it's the most central message over time. I could add if you want to bring everyone out of poverty, if you want to reset economies after the pandemics, whatever is the main issue, we need to work together. If we are united, we will be solving basically every problem of humanity. If I allow someone else to divide us, it will be much, much, much harder. There is a saying in the old Vedas of India, it says, the whole universe is one family. It's as simple as that, we should take it to heart. We start acting on the basis of this, the whole universe is one family, the world will be a much happier place. I will not dwell into the environment problems over time because I think all of you are aware.

Climate change is a major threat and Sri Lanka is one of the nations which are especially severely affected by climate change. Pollution is a major killer of humans, 7 to 9 million

humans are killed every year because of pollution and the great cities of northern India are among the most polluted cities in the entire world. And of course, we are wiping out any number of ecosystems or animals, in there are also a lot of progress; tigers are coming back in India and Nepal, giant pandas are increasing in China, gorillas are increasing in Central Africa, and beavers in Europe, so there is also a lot of progress, but it's a major challenge. I will not dwell with the problems but with the solutions. And solutions start with basically understanding where we are in the world today.

Now I will give you a message which is very different from what you get in a particular Western media but in general, in media. If you watch media in most parts of the world, you get the impression that the world is going from bad to worse, straight into hell, and that we have never ever been living in a more difficult time on planet earth. Exactly the opposite is the case. We are so lucky to be the generation living at the most peaceful, most economically prosperous, and best of times ever. Look, when South Asia came out of colonialism, I mean there still are some Brits thinking that South Asia should thank the Brits for colonialism. When South Asia came out of colonialism, life expectancy in this part of the Earth was 30 years. Maybe a little bit higher in Sri Lanka than in India, but it was around 30 years. Now life expectancy in Sri Lanka is well into the 70s and India will soon pass 70 when it comes to life expectancy. If it were in 1948, nearly all of this audience would have been dead at the time of life expectancy of 30 years. And it was the same in China. When I was born, life expectancy on the planet was 46. Now it's 72 on the planet. It means that there is more progress from I was born up to today, than there was from Adam and Eve and up to when I was born. This has nothing to do with me, it's just the enormous progress of our time, and the same with education. When South Asia was left by the Brits around 1948, hardly any Indians could read and write. Now basically all Indian children are starting in school. Even if school quality is too low in many places, in Sri Lanka all children are starting in school. In India, nearly all children are starting in school. So, there's enormous progress. The average human being today is much taller, much fatter, but that's much better than being hungry, in much better health, and much better educated than any point in human history. We just don't understand it because media is always on the negative side of things.

If I say this, some people will raise their hand and say, yes, sir, this is right. We are fast developing on the planet. But there is a lot more violence. Again, exactly the opposite. We are living in the most peaceful of times. Horrible as the war in Ukraine is, there's never been a more peaceful time. There's never been a time where the chance of any individual human being

dying in violence, whether domestic violence, or terrorism, or street violence, or wars, the chance of dying in violence has never been as low as now. Just we don't understand history. The Chinese have made a lot of discoveries in the old Chinese capital, Anyang, in Henan province. Just in Anyang, there were thousands of sites where the old Chinese offered to the gods. Not goats, they offered human beings to the gods those days. And there are lots of people who are burned with their chains on. Because slaves those days were living their entire lives with chains, and they were buried with their chains. But there are no one living on the planet with physical chains today, and thank God we are not offering humans. So, let's forget the idea that the past was a peaceful time. The past was a much more violent time. We have gradually been able to reduce violence, and of course we should do a lot more to reach there.

Then some people will say, wow, that environment is more critical. Yes, the forces of nature and climate change are more critical. But our ability to handle them are also much better. There was a cyclone in the Indian state of Odisha three years ago. One of the most powerful cyclones in Indian history. How many people died? Ten. It may have been a little bit more than the first figure of ten, but not a lot more. Why did only ten people die with this enormous power of nature? Because Odisha has a very decent chief minister, he put up embassies to take everyone out of the area. India has a very good weather forecasting system; it was precise weather forecasting. They knew exactly where it would hit, and of course, no one died after the event because of hunger or diseases, which have been the case in the past. We had a similar cyclone in Bangladesh in the 1970s. It may not have been exactly the same, but similar, killed 500,000 people. In Odisha it was ten, and this shows that yes, we are playing with very, very, very powerful forces which we should not play with. But also, even the poorest nations in the world are much more prepared to handle them than they were in the past. So, this is the basis. Humanity has solved great problems in the last decades. On that basis, we can do even better in the future.

And let me bring to your attention three main tendencies in today's world. Number one, we are living in the Asian century. It may be hard to swallow for us Westerners, but when it comes to the environment, the lead nation of every single technology is China, with no exception. I mean, China last year produced 82% of all solar panels in the world, produced 70% of all electric batteries in the world. Yes, you may buy a Tesla, maybe designed in California, but the battery in all likelihood is made by CATL, the biggest battery producer in the world. And half the value of the car is the battery. So, it matters who makes the battery as much as who designs the overall car. And China was 80% of all hydropower, 60% of all solar

power, 57% of all electric cars. I can give you one number upon the other. There is no exception. China is the lead nation on all environment technology. So even an Australian research institute who just judged the United States and China on the 35 most incredible technologies of our age, and their conclusion was that China was leading the United States in scientific papers in 27 out of these 35 technologies. I cannot judge on that, but there is no doubt China is the lead nation on environment protection. The second is India. Prime Minister Modi is launching green missions by the day. Green hydrogen mission, electric battery mission, electric car/electric vehicles mission, solar production in India mission, all these missions. This is basically what South Korea did when this Nation grew from absolute poverty and nothing in the 1950s into being one of the most successful nations in the world. It was exactly that, using the power of the state to drive the market and create the Samsung's and Hyundai's. And exactly that is what Prime Minister Modi is now doing in India.

So, what is the lesson learned for Sri Lanka? Of course, to benefit from this, this Nation is very close to China, very close to India at the same time. Chinese and Indians are happy to invest here. Yes, of course, there are tensions and difficulties which will have to be handled by President Wickremesinghe and others, but it's an enormous opportunity for Sri Lanka to be located in the most dynamic part of the world, dynamic when it comes to economic development, but also dynamic when it comes to green development. And in particular, Sri Lanka is very, very close to southern India. While India overall is moving fast, southern India is moving much faster than the north. Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are the most successful states in India. Great on technology, great on green growth, high tech opportunities, and the old time when Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu could not work together for political reasons we all can recall. It's over. There's no reason Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu cannot work closely together. For instance, encouraging international companies to invest both in Tamil Nadu and in Sri Lanka and then get benefits of scale from coming into this part of the world. So that's number one. We are in the Asian century, and that's, of course, going back to the past. 250 years ago, 60% to 70% of the global GDP was in South Asia and China combined, 60% to 70%. It went down to about 4% at the end of colonialism, but it's now coming back. Will it come back to 60%? Yes, probably. Not immediately, but over some time. So being in the Asian century, is an enormous opportunity for Sri Lanka.

The second is focus on the political economy. That's where we see the change on climate and environment, not on diplomacy. Look, in Glasgow, in the UK, the Brits did brilliantly with the climate talks in Glasgow. But it was not their mistake, but the focus was

completely wrong. The focus was, shall we phase out coal, or shall we phase down coal? Has no meaning in the world out there. Absolutely zero meaning from the real world. Just a diplomatic game which can keep good ambassadors busy for a lot of time with no impact on the world outside. Some people in Glasgow even blamed India, and by extension, I'm sure, Sri Lanka, for climate change. Well, North American emissions up to this point is 25 times South Asian emissions per capita, 25 times. How can anyone from the West blame the Indian subcontinent for climate change? Well, it's also 10 times bigger than the Chinese emissions, so why should China be blamed? The good news, of course, is that both China and India are solving problems. There should not be blamed for problems which are largely caused by the West. But if diplomacy is not the solution, what is then the solution? The solution is the political economy. That means decisions made by Xi Jinping and Modi, but also by President Biden or the leadership of the European Union. Look at the figures here. In Glasgow, the quarrel was about US\$20 billion. Well, the Anti-Inflation Act in the United States, which is the greenest bill ever in the history of that country, that is \$370 billion. So compare the quarrel in Glasgow, \$20 billion, with Biden getting through \$370 billion in the American Congress. Yes, true, this is a somewhat protectionist document. All is about developing the United States because, well, Biden's voters are in Michigan, not in Maharashtra, so he prioritizes the United States. All that is true. But even for the developing world, this is much more important than what's happening in Glasgow. If you are Malawi, well, the Chinese and the Americans are bringing down the price of solar and wind and electric vehicles so you can afford it by your own means. That's much, much better than some handouts from the rich in these quarrels in the climate talks. So, focus on the political economy and particularly on business. In most nations, businesses are now ahead of governments.

In my nation, Norway, I think I know basically every politician in Norway and basically every business leader in Norway. It's a small country. The business leaders are much greener than the politicians. It's much more taken to heart the significance of climate change and are much more ready to act than political leaders. And the same is all over the globe and let me give you a few examples. In Indonesia, there is a company called RGE, it's the biggest paper and pulp company in the world, one of the biggest palm oil companies in the world, biggest viscosity company in the world making clothes from wood. In the past, it was a huge part of the problem in Indonesia, cutting down forests by the day. Now, with RGE, there is absolutely zero deforestation in the value chain. Not a tree is cut from the virgin rainforest in Indonesia. Even more so, they are protecting a huge rainforest in the island of Sumatra, and that rainforest

is much better protected than those protected by the government of Indonesia. Not because the government of Indonesia doesn't have the best intentions, but this company has all the helicopters, and all the fire brigades, and all the equipment, and the staff who can protect the rainforest in a way the Indonesian government, even with the best of intentions, cannot do. And last year, there was zero deforestation in the second biggest forest nation in the world, Indonesia. Zero. Thanks to good policies by the government of Jokowi, but also thanks to these business activities, the big players, those who caused the havoc in the past, are now a solution for the future. Of course it's not just in Indonesia, look to the United States of America. Microsoft has promised to be carbon neutral by 2030, it has even promised that it will compensate for all emissions in the history of Microsoft. Back to the 1970s, everything will be compensated for by then purchasing credits, which can be credits from Sri Lanka, mangrove restoration in Sri Lanka, forest protection in Sri Lanka, tree planting in Sri Lanka. All that can be paid for by this promise by Microsoft and many other companies.

And in Europe, IKEA, one of the biggest furniture companies in the world, they're far ahead of any government when it comes to circular revolution. They believe at the end that if you buy a yellow sofa today, well, maybe five years ago, into the future you want a red sofa, well, you should be able to hand in the yellow sofa to IKEA. They should sell it to another customer, or they should take it and break it down and use all the equipment into new products. In India, there is a company called Attero, they can use every single part of the air conditioning here, or your computer, or my phone; everything can be recycled into new products. And there is indeed more gold in one kilo of electric waste than there is in one kilo of gold ore from, say, South Africa. So, it's an enormous value which we can tap into if we let business do the job. And that's why it's been such a pleasure to work with Ruwan and of course under the leadership of the President to bring investors to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka still needs to do more to create an investment climate where more will come, but this place has an enormous opportunity to get investors from India, from China, from America, from Europe, from all over the world into the green economy of Sri Lanka. But then there needs to be a focus on business. Government needs to regulate market, set the rules, but business will have to do the job and provide the scale of the technology.

And thirdly, 1) Asian century, 2) business dominance. Third is technology. Without technology, we will not be able to resolve the problems because we have all the technologies already. All technologies we need are available. They will improve and they will need to scale up. But in particular, I wanted to focus your brain on artificial intelligence. I don't think we still

have anticipated the importance of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is probably the biggest technological revolution of all times. Probably bigger than the first engines, probably bigger than the internet revolution, probably bigger than everything else because it will interfere with absolutely everything we do. Health, education, entertainment, how we find love, how we work in our jobs, how we do our traffic, everything will be impacted upon by artificial intelligence. And in most areas, we need to regulate because all the technologies which can give some good can also do some bad. I mean the same drone which can deliver a dosa to your door can also deliver a bomb to your door for sure. But the opportunities for the green revolution here is enormous. We can integrate all the systems, of course, the wind energy, the solar energy, pumped storage in the rivers, turn on and off the temperature in completely new ways, everything organized by artificial intelligence. Traffic will be completely different. I mean some people are worried with autonomous cars. To me, it's an enormous opportunity. When I drive, sometimes I get sleepy and sometimes I stay even close to fall asleep. Autonomous cars will never fall asleep. Sometimes I'm tempted to drink quite a lot before going into the car. Autonomous cars will never drink. Autonomous cars will never speed above the speed limit. Nearly all those reasons which cause death in traffic will be removed. And road accidents are now the biggest cause of death for anyone between 15 and 30 in the world. Yes, we are elderly, we die from other reasons. But if you are a young person, a road accident is the biggest threat to your life overall in the world. And this will be drastically reduced.

And, of course, for the health, even the best of doctor may have seen 5,000 cancer patients. Artificial intelligence can roll through every cancer case which is documented in human history and set the diagnosis. And then, of course, robotics will do the surgery in a much, much more precise way than even the best doctor can do. And I can go on and I can go on. There's a fantastic article by Mr. Friedman in the New York Times this week about artificial intelligence¹. Please read it. And you will be amazed, maybe scared, maybe enthusiastic, but we can never, never, never, ever escape it. And those who try will be the losers in history. There's a price everywhere in the world to pay if you come late to history. Yes, I understand that it may be difficult to speak to a farmer in Ratnapura or Polonnaruwa about artificial intelligence. They may have more immediate issues there, as most people have. But this will transform the world totally, and if you don't understand it, we will be historical losers. There is

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/opinion/artificial-intelligence-chatgpt.html>

also in my younger days, there was a company called Kodak. Some of you may recall it. Every film in the world was Kodak. Well, Kodak didn't understand the digital revolution. And what is it now? It's a historical museum in the city of Rochester, upstate New York in the United States. It doesn't exist any longer. Much, much later, I had a Nokia phone. Well, Nokia was by far the biggest telecom company in the world, a great Finnish company. Well, they went from being the biggest to the 10th biggest in one and a half years. Again, because in the meantime, Steve Jobs came up in California with a smartphone, which Nokia didn't believe in. So it's a very, very brutal price to be paid if you come late to history, so I could just encourage Sri Lanka to look into all the opportunities and also areas where we need regulations from artificial intelligence.

I will then finally say a few words about the geopolitics and at the end about the Indian Ocean. The main issue in global geopolitics today is the relationship between the United States and China. And since these are by far the two most important powers, I mean, India is also important, Europe is also important, I mean, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, smaller nations like Sri Lanka, everyone is important. But these two are more important than anyone else. And if that relationship goes into confrontation rather than competition and cooperation, it will be dangerous for all of us. That demands change, both for the United States and for China. What should be the change we as smaller nations should ask to the United States? That is, get out of your missionary commitment. Don't think that you can sit in Washington and regulate the world and that your values should be implemented everywhere in the world. Let me give you one example. I saw a resolution from a subcommittee in the American Congress who had an opinion on when Sri Lanka should have local elections. And I tell you, these guys have never heard about Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa or Tangalle or Ratnapura. If I asked the name of the President of Sri Lanka, sorry my friend, most of them would not be able to name the President of Sri Lanka. Still, they have an opinion on the exact timing for an election in Sri Lanka. I mean, what is that? How can you sit in Washington and believe that you should have an opinion on everything under the sun and you should force your opinion on the rest of the world? The United States, and by extension the West, where I come from, has been involved in every war in the last decades. China has not been involved in any war since 1979. And India, not in any real war since 1971 when they liberated Bangladesh. And if you go to Delhi or to Beijing, they have no idea that they should sit in Delhi or in Beijing and rule the world and have an opinion on every single conflict everywhere under the sun. They believe in defending Chinese or Indian interests.

Prime Minister Modi is a staunch Hindu. He has no idea that Hinduism should spread to the world. President Xi is coming on the basis of 2,500 years of Confucian history in China. He has no idea of spreading Confucianism to the rest of the world. While we in the West tend to believe that Christianity should be spread to everyone, at least that was my mother's and grandmother's generations dream in Norway, and we believe that a liberal Western society should spread to every single corner of the world. That idea needs to go. Because it has led us into so many unnecessary wars, so much bloodshed, still many, many more people died in Vietnam or Iraq than those who have died so far in Ukraine. That is no excuse for Putin. He used that as an excuse. It's no excuse for Putin. But still, it shows how the West was led into unnecessary, bad wars, because of this missionary instinct. It needs to go. The United States needs to accept that China is the other main power of our time. They need to work together, find every area where they can work together, and when there are disagreements and disputes, it must be handled through dialogue and respect. On the Chinese side, well, they have over the last few years employed what they call the wolf warrior diplomacy, which has been to stand up whenever there is the slightest attack on Chinese dignity. Even in small nations of the world, they go up in arms and react very, very severely to that. The Chinese should be more confident in their new role as a global superpower. They should be flexible in all conflicts, say with India in the Himalayas, or with the Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea. China can be more flexible and it can be more acceptable to different voices, and they do not kind of front every Chinese interest everywhere in the world. But if the United States stops this missionary idea that the world can be run from Washington and China tries to be a little bit more accommodative, we will have a much, much better world.

I tell you, in the next hundred years, I give a bet here and now, China will not adopt an American political system. The United States will not adopt a Chinese political system. Well, if that's the case, maybe we should live together on the basis of different systems in the world, which can work together. And that is where small nations like Sri Lanka or my nation, Norway, or any other small nation, can play a role. Because no small nation wants to choose. When John Bolton was the National Security Advisor of the United States, he asked the African leaders, you need to choose. Either you are with us or you are with China. Well, there was not one president, not one prime minister, on that entire continent of 54 nations in Africa, not one raised his or her hand to say, I want to be with you Mr. National Security Advisor. Nor would any of them be just with China. They want to send their students to both Tsinghua and to Harvard. They want to get trade from both nations. I mean, most of them have much more trade with

China than the United States, but for sure they want trade from both nations. They want people-to-people contact. They want to be inspired by the idea of wealth integration. Every small nation in the world wants to be able to work both with the United States and with China, for sure also with India and Europe and others. And it's important that small nations stand up for this, because then we will get a much better world.

Finally, of course, Sri Lanka is situated in the Indian Ocean. There was very good news a couple of weeks ago when the world came together to make a regulation of the sea beyond national sea borders. That is very important, because there is no regulation of the deep seas. In the past there was no need, because no one could actually do anything there. But now the possibility is that at least the most advanced nations can-do deep-sea mining, destroy the environment that way. They can overfish and destroy it that way. So, we need regulations for these deep oceans. That is gradually coming, and that's a very, very good sign. But we should also tell everyone, please be careful. We do know much less of the bottom floor of the sea than we know of the moon or Mars. It may be crazy, but that's the case. We have very little knowledge of the deep seas and the bottom floor of the sea. And when we don't have knowledge, let's be careful. Let's not start mining there before we have much more overview of the environment consequences. And we need to stop overfishing. I still recall when I was sitting with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, then the one female President in Africa, in her presidential office in Monrovia, Liberia. I was Norwegian minister at the time, and I asked her, how can I help you, Madam President? And she said, please send me your coast guard. Because just from the presidential palace, you could see any number of fishing vessels, some from East Asia, some from Europe, basically robbing the resources of this dirt-poor African nation. They had no coast guard to push them away. They could go as close to the coast as you can think of, just fishing and taking the resources of a very, very poor African nation. This needs to stop. And it can be stopped if the main nations in the world come together and put pressure on the fishing industry to get this stopped. But we need regulations.

Of course, all developed nations can stop this, and nations like India cannot accept this at all. But African nations have, in reality, no opportunity to stop it. It must stop. And finally, I will also mention, since I haven't spoken a lot of my own nation, Norway, that this is probably one of the areas where a Nation of Sri Lanka can have some benefit of learning from Norway and seeing what we have done. I believe we have been one of the most successful coastal nations in the world when it comes to regulating the fisheries and when it comes to planning and mapping the coastal areas. Norway is dividing our coast in three parts. One is the north,

the Barents Sea, to the Russian border. One is the middle part, and then we have the southern part, which is towards Denmark and Germany. And we have an overall comprehensive plan for all these areas, which bring in everything. Fisheries, oil and gas, coral reefs, shipping, agricultural pollution. Everything is brought into one plan so that we can take the right decision based on that plan. It's a rolling plan, so every five years there will be a roll of that plan. But it gives a fantastic, in my view, instrument for making the right decisions. And we have been able to, even in the worst of crisis, even now with Ukraine, still to work with Russia on common policies for the fisheries in our areas, because we cannot solve this alone. Back in the days, I mean, we had herring, then herring disappeared. Cod is the mainstay of Norwegian life for the last thousand years. I mean, we are a cod nation. Well, the cod disappeared, or at least close to disappeared. Well, what did we need to do? We need to regulate the fisheries, but we couldn't do it alone. We needed to do it with the European Union, with Iceland, and with Russia. And now, of course, herring and cod has come back in abundance. Nature is bouncing back if we're not making it difficult for nature. And now the fishermen are making lots and lots of money, but they needed this cooperation where they were able to work with Russia, even when they had disagreements with the Russians in other areas. So, I can only recommend this. We need planning for the Indian Ocean, working with everyone, even if some nations may sometimes be difficult. Make sure that we are not destroying the open seas. And again, Sri Lanka, being an island nation, a coastal nation, and a nation, which can work with anyone, has a great role to play in the next decade as a centre for these ideas in the Indian Ocean. So, thank you so much for listening to me. I will go back to my opening. Let's create a world where we take to heart the old Indian axiom, the whole universe is one family. That's which will lead to progress for humanity in the 21st century. They understood it 3,000 years ago in India, but we can implement it in our era. Thank you so much.

Mr. Erik Solheim, the Sixth and Former United Nations (UN) Environment Executive Director and Under-Secretary-General of the UN, and Former Minister of Development and Minister of Environment for Norway