

# Navaratna-Bandara, Abeysinghe M. The Management of Ethnic Secessionist Conflict: The Big Neighbour Syndrome. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth, 1995.

Kenneth Bush

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**Navaratna-Bandara, Abeysinghe M.** *The Management of Ethnic Secessionist Conflict: The Big Neighbour Syndrome*. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth, 1995.

From the vantage point of 1996, the management of violent ethnic conflict (or more accurately, identity-based conflict) is one of the most pressing issues on the contemporary political agenda. Events around the world underscore this now-common assessment from Bosnia and Somalia to Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland. Yet, despite the recent proliferation of studies on ethnic conflict there is still, as Donald Horowitz notes, "in the main, too much knowledge and not enough understanding, too much evidence chasing after too few categories." *The Management of Ethnic Secessionist Conflict* is a book which makes a modest contribution to understanding an important dimension of ethnic conflict management by examining the conditions and contingencies which increase or decrease the likelihood that devolution will be accepted as a "compromise settlement" in secessionist situations. Navaratna-Bandara seeks to fill a perceived gap in the ethnic conflict management literature by bringing together two hitherto disconnected bodies of work on ethnic secessionism and devolution.

*The Management of Ethnic Conflict* is a revised version of Navaratna -Bandara's doctoral thesis submitted to the University of York in 1992. Overall, it has weathered the transition from dissertation to book quite well. Indeed, one of the welcome legacies of its intellectual origins is its theoretical and methodological self-consciousness, which helps to keep the book focused and well structured. The cases chosen for the study differ according to the responses of "Big Neighbours" to secessionist movements in neighbouring countries: secession (India-East Pakistan); annexation (Turkey-Cyprus); and devolution (Australia -PNG and India-Sri Lanka). A fourth theoretically possible option is argued not to have been pursued by any of the Big Neighbours in the study: "to assist or to merely stand idly by in the face of military subjugation of the secessionists by the central regime" (77) although India's Sri Lanka policies during and after the 1987 Indo-Lanka Agreement would probably fit in this cell of the matrix of possibilities. In the pursuit of these policy options, Navaratna-Bandara argues that the Big Neighbour chooses from a menu of four potential roles: the "pressure role"; the "big-stick role"; the "interventionist role"; and the "invitational role."

The central empirical point of reference in the book (by far) is the India -Sri Lanka case. The cases noted above, as well as that of Syria-Lebanon, are less developed empirically, and tend to be compared and contrasted to the Sri Lanka-India case within the model developed in the study. Thus, the book is not a systematic comparative case study in the vein of Milton Esman's *Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) or Horowitz's masterful "Making Moderation Pay: The Comparative Politics of Ethnic Management," in Joseph Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (Toronto: Lexington, 1990). However, the book is reasonably good at drawing out the theoretical implications of its cases. More specifically, it does a fine job sifting through and assessing the complex sets of actors and issues that have stormed across the Sri Lankan political landscape over the past 13 years. Much of the persuasiveness of the book's analysis is based on Navaratna-Bandara's keen sense of the regional politics that have played out in Sri Lanka. For example, in Chapter Two there is a good discussion of

the India-Sri Lanka friction over overt and covert political and military assistance received by Colombo from such states as Israel, China, the USA, and Pakistan. Less developed is the discussion of India's fluctuating military, financial, and political support for various Eelamist secessionist groups (most notably, the LTTE from 1984 to 1987). Nonetheless, new comers to Sri Lankan politics will benefit substantially from Navaratna-Bandara's analysis of regional political dynamics.

While Navaratna-Bandara claims to consider both internal and external dimensions of the management of ethnic secessionist conflict, his principal analytic reference is "the Big Neighbour." The result is a decidedly top-down analysis of the conflict management process. Although part of the contribution of this book is the insights concerning the "Big Neighbour syndrome," this is only one piece of the conflict management and resolution puzzle. The internal dimensions of the process require more rigorous examination in order to develop an understanding of the full picture. This would entail a thick analysis of inter- and intra-group relations, and the ebb and flow of state-society relations. In the Sri Lanka-India case this would include a full consideration of the impact of the tensions between the Central Government of India and the State Government of Tamil Nadu on India's Sri Lanka policies, as well as the impact of the wide fluctuations in the relationships between and within political and social sub-groups within the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Such "internal" dimensions have a profound impact on the conditions under which devolution of government becomes the preferred or spurned policy response to ethnic secessionism.

Abeyasinghe Navaratna-Bandara is to be congratulated on what would appear to be his first book. Hopefully, it is but the first contribution to an on-going and the essential discussion of how to get big neighbours and small neighbours to live peaceably in the same small neighbourhood.

Kenneth Bush

Queen's University