

---

# SRI LANKA: BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Jayadeva Uyangoda

The escalating war in Sri Lanka has begun to spring interesting surprises. For example, a day or two after Chennai's *The Hindu* ran an editorial under the title 'Tigers on the Run,' there was panic in Colombo that the Tigers had come to the Colombo airport's runway. With the appearance of Tiger aircraft carrying and dropping bombs over the skies Colombo, evading radar detection and fire from the ground, the war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has the potential to reach a new phase where high-tech instruments might play a key role in the way in which the war is conducted.

The developments in Sri Lanka's war during the past few months as well as what is happening at present offer very rich material for analysis of intra-state civil war. The government has opted for a full-scale military offensive, while publicly claiming it was a mere defensive response, knowing very well that an overall outcome favourable to the government might take two to three years. The Rajapakse administration seems to be taking up the challenge of being locked into another protracted and intense phase of war with two outcomes in mind. The LTTE would either be militarily defeated, or so decisively weakened as not to be a threat to the Sri Lankan state in any significant way. Then, as the official vision goes, a victor's peace, or 'peace with dignity,' will dawn in this island.

The section of the government that has conceptualized, planned, strategized and begun to execute the present phase of war appears to believe that in the past the Sri Lankan armed forces could have won the war against the LTTE, but were prevented from doing so not by military factors, but by extra-military, or political, factors. Interference in the strategy and execution of the war by politicians, the pressure from the internationals to move away from a military solution and the concerns for human rights and humanitarian consequences are the three main extra-military factors. In this total commitment to a favourable military outcome, the government seems to be even willing to endure negative economic consequences of a protracted war.

The LTTE on the other hand appears to be ready for a protracted war too. The LTTE's commitment to a protracted

war seems to emanate from a different framework of strategic calculus. This thinking may be summarized as follows: A long-drawn-out war would create grave humanitarian and human rights problems for the government, isolating the regime from the international community. An intense war that escalates the cost of war and spreads violence would seriously damage the economy, eroding the support base of the regime and weakening the capacity of the economy to fund the war. A war that damages the economy while producing serious human rights issues, weakening the rule of law and the democratic process, would also sharpen contradictions in the Southern polity. This thinking is also governed by a very interesting strategic calculation that the LTTE appears to have made. Unlike the government, the LTTE does not seem to aim at a military victory. The LTTE perhaps knows that a military victory over the Sri Lankan state is not possible, in view of both the superior military strength of the state and the configuration of regional and international forces in favour of the state. The LTTE's military-strategic aim seems to focus on preventing the Sri Lankan state from obtaining a military victory, leading to a military and eventually political stalemate in the conflict. The LTTE does not seem to mind the immense suffering of Tamil civilians in this war, as long it is able to score political points internationally.

The war in the Eastern Province during the past six months or so to a great extent demonstrated the working of the competing strategic calculations of both sides. The government, using the forces of the LTTE's breakaway Karuna faction, sought to dislodge the LTTE from the province through a series of conventional battles. The LTTE, facing superior fire-power of the state, has decided to withdraw from the Eastern Province. This was similar to what the LTTE did in the Jaffna peninsula in December 1995. Faced with a massive conventional offensive by the state, the LTTE withdrew all its fighters, cadres and military assets to the Vanni jungles without resisting the advancing the army. It also evacuated several hundred thousand civilians to the Vanni, south of the Jaffna peninsula.

Meanwhile, the government, true to its new thinking, did not capitulate before international or civil society concerns

about very serious human rights violations and humanitarian crises. It practiced, quite effectively, the art of denial, cover-up and intimidation whenever these issues were raised. The government also went in search of international support from sources that do not consider these 'political' issues when offering economic and military assistance. So far, both the government and the LTTE have succeeded in maintaining their short-term strategic objectives without incurring huge costs.

At present, the war has shifted from the Eastern Province to the Northern Province. The government's strategy seems to be to engage the LTTE in a long-drawn war while blocking its military supplies and funding. The Rajapakse administration's international campaign that it has been fighting terrorism seems to have struck a more than sympathetic code in Washington, DC. Full backing of the US, with occasional murmurs about human rights and media freedom, might guarantee some success in President Rajapakse's own 'war against terrorism.' The LTTE's lack of a political programme of compromise and militaristic intransigence might even hasten its belated downfall.

Meanwhile, the government might not go for an all-out assault on the Vanni because of the fact that the LTTE is concentrating all its military might there for counter-attack. In this theatre of war, the LTTE might spring more surprises in order to alter the strategic balance. That is the nature and character of the LTTE's war machine. It exploits the element of surprise to reverse previous military losses and to turn the tables on the other side.

In this backdrop, is resumption of negotiation between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE possible? Objectively speaking, there is no reason for either side to return to talks. There is hardly anything that can be achieved. Both sides seem to be waiting for the outcome of the present phase of war. Is a negotiated settlement to the conflict possible? Not between the Rajapakse administration and the LTTE at present. While the former might wait for a victor's peace settlement, the latter will also wait patiently for a settlement for a separate state. This is Sri Lanka's 'scissors crisis.'

Although it is quite depressing my own assessment is that Sri Lanka's conflict has now reached a stage beyond a settlement through power-sharing. The little interest that the LTTE has shown for several years in negotiated regional autonomy has now totally disappeared. The more-than-little interest that the reformist sections of the Sinhalese political class had earlier developed in a settlement of negotiated regional autonomy has also diminished. This is shown in the proposals prepared by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the main constituent party of the present United People's Freedom Alliance coalition regime. President Rajapakse is the leader of the SLFP, and obviously the new proposals reflect his thinking and the thinking of the powerful military-civilian bloc that constitutes the core of the power structure at present.

The SLFP proposals envisage district-based decentralization of power under a strong, centralized and unitary central government headed by the President. These proposals totally ignore Tamil and Muslim demands for regional autonomy and province-based devolution of power. They take Sri Lanka's policy debate on ethnic conflict resolution back to the early 1980s when the J. R. Jayewardene regime, much before the secessionist insurgency by the Tamils developed, attempted district development councils. These minimalist proposals of the Sinhalese political class appear to be prepared by it and for itself. Looking at them from the perspective of the ethnic conflict, they are empty, regressive and hugely majoritarian.

So, Sri Lanka, as they say, is back to square one.

What can one do in these circumstances to prevent Sri Lanka from getting further embedded in a destructive war? Very little, if one wants to be honest. The only option that is worth trying, as far as I can see, is to bring immense international pressure on both the government and the LTTE in order to de-escalate the war, to minimize the grave human rights and humanitarian consequences, and ensure that the war does not get dirtier. ■

May 12, 2007