THE DYNAMICS OF A STALEMATE

Devanesan Nesiah

For negotiations to progress, for justice and security to be established, for normalcy to return, for the peace dividends to reach the populations most affected, several critical reforms need to be adopted. Some of these may require the retraction of steps unilaterally decided on purportedly in the interest of security. For example, the crippling restrictions on fishing in the seas off the North and East may need to be relaxed after negotiating arrangements for mutual security. Further, the bulk of the northern High Security Zone which covers vast tracts of once densely populated areas with fertile agricultural lands may need to be vacated to permit the resettlement of thousands of displaced families, after negotiating required security provisions. Similarly, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim populations displaced from many parts of the North and East may need to be helped and encouraged to resettle in the lands they vacated or, even if they are reluctant to do so, to reclaim their property, after ensuring the safety of all concerned. A large, varied range of other essential reforms are also needed to be undertaken early but carefully and in consultation with the parties involved. Care and consultation are necessary to ensure that these essential reforms are speedily implemented but in such a manner as not to lead to disaster.

There are other questions that warrant even greater circumspection. Should the Sri Lankan Armed Forces totally vacate their presence in the North and East? Should the Sri Lankan Navy scale down its presence in the seas off the North and East? Should the LTTE disband its Navy (Sea Tigers)? Should the LTTE dismantle its administrative, policing and judicial structures and its control of the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts and other areas now effectively under their charge? In the context of the MOU and continuing ceasefire, should the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the LTTE sharply scale down their military capacity and levels of combat preparedness to pre-conflict norms? If either party is willing to take such steps unilaterally, would that strengthen the peace process? Or could it precipitate war?

Overall, the ceasefire declared by the LTTE in Dec. 2002, promptly reciprocated by the UNF government, and sealed by the MOU of Feb. 2003 has held. There have been many instances of breaches of the ceasefire and MOU by both parties, but none of these has led to either party repudiating the ceasefire or MOU. On the other hand, both sides appear to have retained virtually all of the military capacity they possessed in Dec. 2002; their military camps and areas under their control; their military cadres, augmented with fresh recruitment; their weaponry, supplemented with new purchases; their military intelligence gathering and morale boosting activities, etc. Is there a contradiction between the ceasefire and MOU on the one hand, and sustained preparedness for war on the other?

To address this question we need to remind ourselves of the circumstances in which the ceasefire and MOU emerged. Would these have materialized if either side had (or even believed that it had) the capacity to win militarily? After seventeen years of a terrible war that had inflicted massive losses to combatants on both sides and, even more, to helpless civilians, would it have made sense for either party to renounce the war if achieving victory seemed possible? The answer, surely, is no. As in many such instances elsewhere, a critical factor, as in the Sri Lankan case, was a prolonged, mutually hurting military stalemate.

In a game of chess, it is possible to win, lose or draw without erratic play on either side. The superior skill of one player may be so overpowering as to secure a win, or may be adequate only to ensure a draw. Often in a drawn position (i.e. one in which neither party has the capacity to force a win without erratic play by the other), play could go on indefinitely till either party makes a fatal error or the two parties agree to a draw. A stalemate is a very special situation in which the two players are deadlocked with neither party having a move available to break that deadlock; no further play is possible and a draw is forced. But in conflict situations, unlike in chess, moves could be retracted and erratic steps could transform a stalemate position into a crisis point or a watershed with multiple possibilities. These could include progress to negotiations (hopefully leading to a solution to the crisis), or a regression (back to war); or the parties could remain deadlocked (e.g. as in Cyprus) in no win – no loss, no peace – no war positions.

Why did the two parties persist in terrible, mutually agonizing combat for 17 years? Because winning the war was, by far, each side's first preference. It appears that both sides have now set aside this option, not because it has become less desirable but because it has proved to be unattainable. What they are now engaged in, negotiating a settlement, is a difficult and risky venture – perhaps even more difficult and more risky than waging all out war, and less attractive in that whereas in a war the victor could expect to enjoy the spoils, in the case of a negotiated solution or a bloodless coup, those responsible for success are seldom the main beneficiaries. Frequently the outcome may be unpredictable and some of the key negotiators may even disappear from the scene during or after the negotiations, even if they had played a critical role in its success. There have been many instances, in many parts of the world, of this happening through assassination, or deposition, or marginalization for one reason or the other. Gandhi in India,

Mossadeq in Iran, Naguib in Egypt, Lumumba in the Congo, and Allende in Chile are a few of the numerous examples that could be cited. Thus prolonging the status quo undisturbed by a prolonged, low intensity conflict with or without inconclusive negotiations may be the second preference of the leadership. But this option too has proved to be unbearably costly to both parties in Sri Lanka. Abandoning war altogether and engaging in decisive negotiations may be only the third preference, eventually resorted to when the other options (a decisive win, and a prolonged low intensity conflict) have closed. This appears to be the situation now in Sri Lanka.

In instances in which a military stalemate is an essential precondition for successful negotiations, any unilateral dropping of defences by either side could dislodge the stalemate and be counter productive. It could be not only suicidal, but also the trigger for the resumption of war. Every step needs to be taken carefully and without disturbing the military stalemate. But, subject to this caution, many urgent initiatives are needed to quickly and substantially reduce the military build up and level of combat preparedness so as to sustain progress towards to a just and lasting peace. ■

AFTER THE WINNING OF THE IRAQ WAR

Eric Hobsbawm

For those with a long memory and an understanding of the ambitions and history of previous empires—and their inevitable decline—the present behaviour of the United States is familiar and yet unprecedented. It may lead to the militarisation of the US, the destabilisation of the Middle East and the impoverishment, in every way, of the rest of the world.

THE present world situation is quite unprecedented. The great global empires that have been seen before, such as the Spanish in the 16th and 17th centuries, and notably the British in the 19th and 20th centuries, bear little comparison with what we see today in the United States empire. The present state of globalisation is unprecedented in its integration, its technology and its politics.

We live in a world so integrated, where ordinary operations are so geared to each other, that there are immediate global consequences to any interruption—SARS, for instance, which within days became a global phenomenon, starting from an unknown source somewhere in China. The disruption of the world transport system, international meetings and institutions, global markets, and even whole economies, happened with a speed unthinkable in any previous period.

Technology

There is the enormous power of a constantly revolutionised technology in economics and above all in military force. Technology is more decisive in military affairs than ever before. Political power on a global scale today requires the mastery of this technology, combined with an extremely large state. Previously the question of size was not relevant. Britain that ran the greatest empire of its day was, even by the standards of the 18th and 19th century, only a medium-sized state. In the 17th century, Holland, a state of the same order of size as Switzerland, could become a global player. Today it would be inconceivable that any state, other than a relative giant—however rich and technologically advanced it was—could become a global power.

There is the complex nature of today's politics. Our era is still one of nation-states—the only aspect of globalisation in which globalisation does not work. But it is a peculiar kind of state wherein almost every one of the ordinary inhabitants plays an important role. In the past the decision-makers ran states with little reference to what the bulk of the population thought. And during the late 19th and early 20th century governments could rely on a mobilisation of their people which is, in retrospect, now quite unthinkable. Nevertheless, what the population think, or are prepared to do, is nowadays more directed for them than before.

A key novelty of the US imperial project is that all other great powers and empires knew that they were not the only ones, and none aimed at global domination. None believed themselves invulnerable, even if they believed themselves to be central to the world—as China did, or the Roman empire at its peak. Regional domination was the maximum danger envisaged by the system of international relations under which the world lived until the end of the cold war. A global reach, which became possible after 1492, should not be confused with global domination.

The British empire in the 19th century was the only one that really was global in a sense that it operated across the entire planet, and to that extent it is a possible precedent for the American empire. The Russians in the communist period dreamed of a world transformed, but they knew well, even at the peak of the power of the Soviet Union, that world domination was beyond them, and contrary to cold war rhetoric they never seriously tried such domination.