Retiring the LTTE: Ending the Conflict in Sri Lanka

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by Ranjith Gunaratna For more than three decades, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eeelam (LTTE) has been endeavoring to weaken the democratically elected government in Sri Lanka. They have primarily used adroit terror and propaganda campaigns interspersed with political negotiation. During the history of its campaign, the LTTE has not displayed any keen, sincere interest in settling the conflict through political negotiations. The apparent reason behind this could be their firm belief in carving an independent state for the Tamils in Sri Lanka through military means. It used the negotiation table mostly to buy time, regroup, and rearm. Yet, its failure or rejection to sit at the negotiation table with firm commitments and sincerity is the gravest mistake the LTTE has ever made. Consequently, it has been paying the price for its failed militaristic approach towards the conflict.

The LTTE, which started its campaign as a small vanguard movement of the Tamil insurgency, later developed into a powerful and highly structured terrorist organization with international offices. Over the years, it secured support for its activities from the Tamil community and others. One of the compelling reasons behind the persistence of support for and the attraction of international Tamils towards the LTTE has been the ability of its leader to ensure absolute authority over every aspect of the organization with high discipline and strict control over cadres. Some contend that the support for the activities of the LTTE is a function of pervasive unhappiness with some aspects of the policies of the Sri Lankan government toward genuine grievances of the Tamil community. According to others, a combination of social, political, and economic ills afflicting the Tamils could be the main reasons. The most significant dynamic in shaping the affairs of the LTTE is the adoption of one-man rule, which may also be the reason for the LTTE’s dramatic failure. Interestingly, the dictatorship of Vellupillai Prabhakaran has prevented the LTTE from transforming itself into a more practical organization that could correspond effectively with the rapidly changing local and global environment. Today, the LTTE is experiencing the gradual loss of everything it achieved previously in the face of the successful military campaign of the Sri Lankan government’s security forces. During the last three decades of its struggle, the LTTE has been able to secure substantial support from certain sections of the international and Tamil communities to wage a prolonged war. It had emerged for a while as a powerful terrorist organization with the ability to present its demands convincingly in any forum. More importantly, it controlled a significant segment of lands in the north of Sri Lanka before the commencement of the recent Sri Lankan military actions. Noticeably, today the LTTE members and its associates have realized that the organization is no longer strong enough to withstand Sri Lanka’s intensive military offensives and is unable to convert past victories into a regeneration of lost momentum. The Course of WarIn fact, the concentration of resources around one man is a strategic failure of the LTTE. Evidently, the LTTE’s inability to address this fundamental weakness has made it difficult to institutionalize conceptual, organizational, and operational adjustments across a diverse political and security environment. Thus, the LTTE’s resiliency, given the recent military defeats, has been greatly reduced. Despite all the illusions about the inviolability of the LTTE and amidst international and domestic pressure, the Sri Lankan government was compelled to respond to the LTTE’s terror campaign in order to maintain law and order in the country and to combat terrorism. However, the Sri Lankan government periodically adopted other political measures, as required. These measures include constitutional changes providing more political space for the Tamils, the introduction of political mechanisms including Provincial Councils, and engagement with the LTTE and other Tamil groups to explore ways to resolve the conflict peacefully even amidst fierce opposition from certain sections of the Sinhalese population, which rejects granting any concession to the Tamils or the LTTE. Often during this latter process, the Sri Lankan government tolerated the intervention of third parties and respected the opinion of the international community. Unfortunately, in response to the government’s gestures to peacefully settle the conflict, the LTTE pounced, misinterpreting the government’s peaceful intentions as weakness. In the recent past, after signing the Cease Fire Agreement with the Sri Lankan government in 2002, the LTTE continued to strengthen its military capacity and violated the agreement more than 2000 times in addition to killing politicians, security personnel, and government officials. Finally, it withdrew unilaterally from the peace negotiations conducted with the backing of Norway and other international actors. Subsequently, the government abrogated the Cease Fire Agreement to look for other alternatives. Against this backdrop, the government decided to seek an end to the terror campaign of the LTTE to clear the path for a lasting political settlement. Today, we witness the final phase of the military campaign, a critically necessary component of the government's efforts in resolving the conflict. Nevertheless, the success of the ongoing operations of the Sri Lankan government lies in its remarkable ability to synchronize a well-crafted military strategy with political ends. In contrast, the LTTE's approach to the present phase of the conflict is fundamentally flawed. The Possible Future of the LTTEThis article attempts to sketch out a sensible portrait of the LTTE after its military defeat and its specific implications on Sri Lanka in the future. In the process, three possible futures for the "new LTTE" can be identified. First, the LTTE may disappear gradually. Second, after the military defeat, the remaining cadres may go underground, pending instructions from surviving leaders tailored toward regrouping and counterattacking. Third, the organization may continue its operations overseas to reach its goals. The first scenario seems plausible if the LTTE’s military aspect is examined on its own. According to this analysis, once the LTTE is militarily defeated and its leadership crushed, it would not be able to stand on its feet again. There are many factors contributing to the possibility of this prediction. The LTTE has been able to maintain the status quo mainly due to its military strength. Its terror campaign was used to solidify its role as the sole terrorist organization in the north; to obtain the support of the Tamil community forcibly for their separatist campaign; to confuse the political world of the South; to intimidate the Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities; and to negotiate their demands more effectively. According to Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, the LTTE has engaged in forcible recruitment of children and women just before and after the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force [IPKF], both to replenish its depleted ranks and to prepare for an

impending offensive. To date, this process continues, and many Tamil refugees from the LTTE-controlled area have recently confirmed that many of their children have been forcibly removed from home at gun point by the LTTE to shoulder its war machine. It is a popular slogan among Sri Lankans that without the gun, the LTTE is only a paper tiger. In this line of argument, after the military defeat, the LTTE would disappear, leaving only its cruel history. The second view is that, after the military defeat, the remaining members will melt into the ordinary population with the intention of conducting clandestine operations against economic, military, political, and other important targets in Sri Lanka. This likely scenario may also result from a desire to counterattack and avenge the military defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan armed forces. The fundamental aim of this phase of the conflict would be to negate the victory of government and create a chaotic environment that damages primarily the Sri Lankan economy. The third scenario, equally likely, is the continuation of LTTE activities through their bases outside Sri Lanka. According to the US State Department, the LTTE, which has funds in many states, has sizable business dealings, including human and drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and some legitimate businesses. Jane's Intelligence Review, which conducted a review of the LTTE in 1998, asserted that the LTTE businesses generate an estimated US$200 to 300 million per year. With these resources, in the future, it can easily sponsor anti-Sri Lanka propaganda campaigns, obtain the service of experts to undermine investment and tourism promotion of Sri Lanka, carry out assassination attempts on Sri Lankan leaders while they are abroad, invest in the share market, buy properties and other business establishments in Sri Lanka, support anti-government activities, and lobby world leaders against Sri Lanka. For example, when the Sri Lankan government intensified its recent military campaign, the LTTE activists staged a series of demonstrations across many large European cities to secure the intervention of world leaders to stop the military offensives. Given the LTTE’s organizational structure and past activities, no one can rule out one or all of these scenarios. It is quite probable that the world can expect a mixture of all of these possibilities in the aftermath of the military defeat. Therefore, action should be initiated now to manage the future phase of the conflict. The Government’s Possible ResponseTo counter these LTTE activities, the government needs to create a strong network of institutions and a monitoring mechanism. Specifically, an institution comprising military and civilian organizations should be established to respond to any LTTE attack and monitor military aspects of the "new LTTE," as well as to counter the LTTE propaganda, fundraising, and other activities internationally. The LTTE has been able to continue its separatist struggle either through voluntary or coerced support from the Tamil population and diaspora. Human Rights Watch notes that approximately 800,000 Tamils are living abroad and that the Tamil diaspora in Canada alone has been contributing to the LTTE coffers at rates of well over US$2 million per month. Their contribution to the war has been highly critical for the survival of the LTTE. Additionally, the LTTE, has pooled the support of many Tamils in Sri Lanka mainly by instigating the nationalist aspirations of the Tamils for a political mechanism of their own. Seeds of Tamil separatism can be traced even from the 1940s, when some Tamil leaders demanded 50/50 representation in the legislature. Therefore, what is most essential is the presentation of a viable political solution to the conflict immediately after the military offensives. The Sri Lankan government has clearly indicated that its key objective is to find a lasting political solution to the conflict once the LTTE is defeated. With this in mind, the government initiated the All Party Representative Committee process to address the legitimate grievances of the Tamils and to strengthen and consolidate the democratic institutions in country’s north. In fact, holding elections in the Eastern Province in 2008 for the first time in fourteen years, the government provided an opportunity to the people to exercise their democratic rights. This process will be continued in the remaining areas once war is over. More important, if the political process is delayed the scenarios mentioned above can be expected at any moment and the government’s victory would be short-lived. On a number of occasions, H.E. Mahinda Rajapakse, the Sri Lankan President, clearly stated that the sole aim of the government is to present a viable political solution to the conflict, closing the final chapter of the LTTE terrorism. On February 4, 2009, in his national day message, the President reiterated his commitment, stating, "I pledge to you today that these people, who share our motherland, will be liberated and given equality and all rights that they are entitled to under the Constitution." Accordingly, once a political solution is presented, the LTTE in any shape would no longer be able to frighten even a bird in the paddy fields. Ranjith Gunaratna is a senior Sri Lankan diplomat who writes frequently on the subject of counter-terrorism and conflict resolution. He authored several books including the translation of "Lee Kwan Yew's The Singapore Story." The following are the strictly personal views of the writer.Courtesy: harvardir.org