
Challenges, dangers and opportunities

Wednesday, 18 March 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 18 March 2009

Challenges, dangers and opportunities By Dayan Jayatileka What is the challenge? To reach the goal of victory and reunification while avoiding the traps set for Sri Lanka. What are these traps and what are our tasks? Sri Lanka stands accused in some quarters of inflicting casualties on civilians, and in others, of the related charge of not agreeing to the international humanitarian evacuation of these civilians trapped in the Wannu pocket. These critics are blind to the reality that if the Sri Lankan armed forces unleashed its full firepower, the Tigers in the Wannu pocket would be overrun and crushed. Instead the Sri Lankan security forces are doing something that very few armies would: taking heavy casualties while scaling down drastically on its use of heavy weapons and air support. As for the criticism that the Sri Lankan state is refusing to seek international assistance in evacuating the trapped civilians, it assumes that the Tigers are willing to let these assets go. It is not the Sri Lankan state that has closed off all exits for these civilians. Above all, this charge is simply a lie. Any reader of the Sunday Times (Colombo), whose sophisticated political reportage has tracked the story for three weeks, would know that Sri Lanka DID NOT reject, and in fact cooperated with, a US Pacific Command plan for extraction of the civilians. However, there are more things on heaven and earth — such as geopolitical and geo-strategic realities— than critics wearing humanitarian lenses dream of. We must prevent a repetition of the events of 1987. Those events were threefold: First, the Sri Lankan military was prevented by external intervention, from finishing the job of defeating the LTTE. Second, this thwarted nationalism generated a Southern blowback which destabilized the state and caused the shedding of far more blood than had been shed in the North-eastern war. Third, the parallel though mutually hostile surge of Southern and Northern extremism — the JVP and LTTE - prevented the implementation of the Indo-Lanka accord and the 13th amendment, thereby providing a gap for the Tigers to escape through and survive to fight more wars. Today, firstly, we must avoid a deterioration of the situation into a war of attrition; a freeze of the situation on the ground in the Wannu pocket so that the Sri Lankan armed forces stay in static positions of maintaining a siege, while the Tigers regain the initiative by launching small unit operations to open up a seam in our encirclement. Secondly, we must avoid being goaded into the sort of operation on our part that will seal our fate internationally. It is damnably difficult to avoid these two extremes but we must find a way and we shall. Beyond these dilemmas of conflict termination, of bringing the war victoriously to a close, are two other traps to avoid. These are to fall prey to efforts to rejuvenate the Tigers and/or to revive the TNA either as a front for the Tigers or as a political version of the Tigers's separatist project, on a seamless continuum with it, while the Tamil Diaspora maintains a war of attrition against the Sri Lankan state. This project of Tiger Thought (Koti Chinthanaya) without the Tigers has to be pre-empted or stamped out, but it must be done in such a way that does not damage our relations either with the Tamils or with the world at large. This too is tricky, possibly even trickier than conflict termination. Already the Tamil Diaspora and the ultra-nationalist Tamil elite are busy laying the foundations for the post-Tiger or post-Tiger Mark I/ pre-Tiger Mark II project. Part of the effort is to discredit Douglas Devananda and Karuna, the anti-Tiger Tamil allies and partners of the democratic Sri Lankan state. Just as psychological warfare and whispering campaigns were launched by the Tamil elite and their Sinhala partners, during previous administrations, with a view to forestalling and diverting a drive for military victory, the same elements are using the same methods to pre-empt Douglas Devananda and Karuna from being accorded their due place and role. The logic of the Tamil elite is to keep the situation ethnically polarized, so that the world sees a Sinhala army in occupation of Tamil areas. The plan is to eliminate the Tamil intermediary and buffer, namely Douglas and Karuna. A variant of the plan is to put in place, instead Tamil ultranationalist elements that will make demands which are in excess of what the Sinhala public opinion will grant. This will ensure permanent political friction and tension such that the whole world can be told that Colombo is incapable of accommodating "even" the TNA, which by the way may have found itself outside the law, be it in Spain or Indian Kashmir. The Tamil elite effort to win politically what it has lost militarily, is being ably assisted by those who cut the political ground on which Douglas and Karuna seek to stand, namely the full (if graduated) implementation of the 13th amendment. Douglas and Karuna have only asked for the immediate granting of the same powers that the other provincial councils in other parts of the island enjoy, in other words the implementation of the principle of equality. Those who oppose the implementation of the 13th amendment, or seek to delay or dilute it, only weaken Douglas and Karuna and strengthen the case of the TNA and validate the arguments of the pro-Tiger elements in the Diaspora. This comes as no surprise, and is a reprise of the events of 1987. Then, the Southern and Northern extremists blocked the implementation of the 13th amendment, which prevented the closing of political and social space for the Tigers. After the Wannu pocket has been cleared, much will depend on the model of the military presence in the North and East. If the military presence is too small or too short, there will be Tiger resurgence, just as there will be one, or a Tamil rebellion with or without the Tigers, if the military presence is too large, clumsy and overlong. Whatever the changed alignments in international politics, it is doubtful that India will permit a revival of the 1984-7 project of covert ethnic engineering, demographic gerrymandering and settlements attempted by the then (UNP) administration's far Right caucus. A study of the new Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine of the US army and Marine Corps, chiefly authored by America's top soldier-scholar General David Petraeus, as well as the critique by yet another US soldier-scholar, Col. Gentile, provide food for thought. A more relevant example would be that of the IPKF which saturated the North and east with large camps, mini-camps and "pickets", with the mini-camps playing a key role. However, many Sinhala admirers of the IPKF model forget two crucial components and accompaniments, namely, the ready availability to the IPKF of Tamil speaking soldiers and police, the close alliance with the EPRLF (whose Suresh OPremachandran in Jaffna and Kirubakaran and Razik in Batticaloa were superb counter-insurgents and Tiger hunters) and most importantly, the North Eastern Provincial Council. The NEPC was a critical part of the IPKF strategy. Any successful replication or adaptation of the IPKF model in post-war Sri Lanka absolutely requires all these components, especially the Northern and Eastern Provincial council/s which made for a degree of self-

governance and self-administration for the Tamil people of those areas. From the USA through India to Russia, there is one thing in common in the messages to Sri Lanka: once you've finished the war, done the Tigers ("if you have to", say some, "because we know you must", say our closer friends), do the politics, share power with the non-violent Tamils. Whatever the tactical differences, as Indian foreign Secretary Shiv Shanker Menon clearly indicated to the media after his meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, there is an Indo-US policy convergence on Sri Lanka, centering on a post-war political framework which makes for power sharing. It is also clear that the US continues to concede that Sri Lanka remains in India's sphere of influence. Though that may no longer be an exclusive sphere of influence, if and when push comes to shove, it remains so. Those Sinhalese and Tamils who look into the mirror and see themselves as a potential Israel have forgotten the open-ended support that Israel enjoys from the sole superpower, the sort of support that no one will extend to either community. They have also forgotten Sri Lanka's geographic position on the doorstep of India. So the Sinhalese and Tamils have a few options. Share power or not, and if not, how to survive internationally, especially in the context of the global recession but more generally as well. If the choice is to share power, who do the Sinhalese share power with? The Tigers? The pro-Tiger TNA? The dogmatic federalists? The mechanistic adherents of the Indian model? Or those who are prepared to work the 13th amendment, to wit, Devananda, Muralidaran and Chandrakanthan? Some commentators quite rightly emphasize the need to distinguish between Tigers, Tamil separatists and Tamil nationalists, but is this the most relevant and comprehensive classification? I think one must also distinguish between Tamil nationalism and Tamil ultra-nationalism, just as one must distinguish between Sinhala nationalism (in a column, "Taraki" once called me a "Sinhala neo-nationalist") and ultra-nationalism. Not all Tamil nationalism can or should be accommodated as President Premadasa was to find out with Chief Minister Vardarajahperumal, an early ally, as the months wore on. Douglas Devananda has had the political courage to point out that the Indo-Lanka Accord and the North & East Provincial Council initially failed mainly because of the LTTE but also because of the leadership of that Council, comprising elements of the EPRLF. That example also illustrates that it is not always the push factor of Sinhala chauvinism that makes Tamil nationalism slide to ultra-nationalism and separatism, proving the late Prof. Urmila Phadnis's observation in her definitive volume on ethnicity in South Asia, that a specific hallmark of Sri Lankan Tamil sub-nationalism was an "autonomist-separatist continuum". This we ignore at our peril. Perhaps Douglas Devananda puts the matter best when he distinguishes between "good and bad Tamil nationalism" using the analogy of good and bad cholesterol. His brand of Tamil nationalism is the equivalent of good cholesterol, he says, without which the body politic cannot survive and function. What he calls "bad nationalism" is what I would call ultra-nationalism. It is shocking to read self-proclaimed leftists, pooh-poohing the 13th amendment as insufficiently progressive a reform of the state. The system of Provincial autonomy as guaranteed by the Indo-Lanka Accord is a reform that the finest Sri Lankan Leftists, such as Vijaya Kumaratunga, supported, shed their blood and sacrificed their lives for. They participated in a Sinhala on Sinhala civil war, alongside the state and the reformist wing of the UNP, precisely for the implementation of this reform. Since it has remained unimplemented in the North, it can hardly be considered obsolescent. One argument against it is that it has been superseded by events, but if it has indeed been superseded, the most important among those events has been the military defeat of the Tigers who, having been saved from defeat by external intervention, were undefeated in 1987. Thus the argument of historical obsolescence cuts both ways. The struggle to implement the 13th amendment fully remains as progressive a task as it ever was — which is why Prakash Karat, the chief theoretician of India's CPI-M, referred even a few weeks ago, to the 13th amendment and Provincial Councils as the basis of a solution. The historical record shows that the real position of Vijaya and the Left was closer to the 13th amendment with de-merger, i.e. to the current structure, than to the 1987-88 merged version. In June 1986, at the Political Parties Conference, convened by President Jayewardene at the written urging of Vijaya, the SLMP, LSSP (represented by Dr. Colvin R de Silva) and CPSL (represented by Pieter Keuneneman) the combined Left took a stand for Provincial autonomy with two councils one for the North, the other for the East. The documents of that conference are available as a stubby volume. Even as he supported the Accord, Vijaya — the closest we came to a Bobby Kennedy— opposed the merger. To sum up then: On the part of the Tamils, the choice is whether they opt for a moderate leadership which the Sinhalese will be willing to share power with, on a basis that the Sinhalese are willing to accept, or whether they wish to live in permanent confrontation by choosing a leadership whose immoderate demands will be unacceptable to the Sinhala majority. Will the Tamils and Sinhalese continue to qualify for liberal-minded Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban's description of the Palestinians, who, he claimed "never lose an opportunity to lose an opportunity"? (The writer states that these are strictly his private views)courtesy:Island.lk