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## For the first time in decades, the Tigers may be tamed

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By Nirj Deva Three years ago, Sri Lanka elected Mahinda Rajapaksa as president because he pledged to take the offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the guerrillas who have been fighting for 25 years to carve out an independent homeland for the country's Tamil minority. Many well-meaning people saw Rajapaksa's promise as warmongering, and, even as Sri Lanka's army has been pressing toward victory, urged him to negotiate with perhaps the world's most fanatical terror organization (the Tamil Tigers, it should be recalled, virtually invented the cult of the modern suicide bomber.)

Fortunately, Rajapaksa listened more to his war-ravaged citizens than to outsiders, and today what seemed impossible - military victory over the Tigers, the oldest, largest, and wealthiest guerrilla army in South Asia - appears at hand. Over the past few months, the Tigers have suffered a series of devastating blows. Instead of commanding much of northern Sri Lanka, they are now confined to a shrinking pocket, and are reduced to mindless military stunts such as the recent bombing by light aircraft of the tax administration building in the capital, Colombo. Thousands of Tamil Tiger fighters have deserted. A rebel army has dwindled to a fanatical few. But fighting the Tigers and seeking a peace deal have never been alternatives. Rajapaksa's predecessors spent years engaged in fruitless talks and ceasefires, during which the guerrillas remained committed to their aim of dividing the country and making demands for political and socio-economic changes that no democracy could accept, even as they carried on killing and kidnapping. Weakening the Tigers militarily has thus always been a necessary condition for achieving a political settlement with Sri Lanka's Tamils. Now that the guerrillas are boxed in, what can Rajapaksa reasonably offer to them and ordinary Tamils? The Tigers' leaders have committed crimes against humanity, and some of them engage in criminal activities. So they have little incentive to demobilize. Some Sri Lankans say the best place for the Tiger leaders is jail. True, but in politics, the best justice can be the enemy of the general good. Though the Tigers can no longer destroy Sri Lanka's democracy, fighting to the last guerrilla is in nobody's interest. Ending this conflict will require political adroitness and continued military firmness. Achieving a lasting peace, though difficult, is possible. On the most basic level, it will almost certainly require security guarantees for the Tigers' leaders. But it should not, as some say, include any offer of power-sharing with the guerrillas (ordinary Tamils are another matter). Sri Lanka is a democracy. In exchange for laying down their arms and ending a pointless and destructive war, Tiger soldiers should be encouraged to take part in politics, but on exactly the same terms as any other Sri Lankan. Nobody should underestimate the difficulty of rebuilding Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north and reconciling the Tamils at a time of global recession. In countries with strong ethnic, tribal, and religious divisions, unless it is made clear from the start that everything possible will be done to foster reconciliation, communal enmity will most likely simmer. Any "victory" that the Tamils perceive as leading to subjugation of their rights and aspirations for equality with the majority Sinhalese will be short-lived. So Rajapaksa must offer the Tamil people a political compromise, perhaps including some cabinet positions, as well as the promise of a revived economy. Indeed, the Rajapaksa government, and the majority Sinhalese, must understand that the political and economic reforms needed to achieve a lasting peace are inextricably intertwined. One cannot succeed without the other. On the political front, a power vacuum must be avoided. Although one of the main goals of reconstruction must be the creation of a democratic system that the Tamils regard as their own, establishing effective governance, and fast, in Sri Lanka's north matters just as much. Order must be restored rapidly, with zero tolerance of looting and other crimes. Nevertheless, victory over the Tigers need not rule out some form of decentralization that guarantees the Tamils some political say, so long as a degree of local autonomy does not destroy Sri Lanka's unity. The alternative to such a political compromise may be a return to the tragic and bloody secessionist course that the Tigers sought for so long. Indeed, no effort should be spared to get sceptical Tamil groups to participate in the forthcoming peacemaking. Of course, it may take some time for the Tamils and their leaders to learn the mutual tolerance and self-discipline of democratic government. Handing over any local power before those leaders are ready to use it would be an error, with potentially disastrous consequences. In the Eastern Province, a good start has been made, with former terrorists now winning through the ballot box and not the bullet. Economic reform also must begin without delay. Sri Lanka's economy must open up - not an easy thing to achieve at a time when liberal economic reforms appear to be in disrepute. But such an opening is essential if the country's Tamils are to have real hopes for their future within the country. Sri Lanka's Buddhist traditions and historic links with Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos makes it easy for it to be a future member of ASEAN, which Sri Lanka should try to join as a means of anchoring its economy in the wider region. Some of what needs to be done, including the sequencing of reconstruction measures, is now better understood - not least due to the different recent experiences in rebuilding Bosnia, Colombia, and other war-torn states. These efforts demonstrated the need to have an effective legal system and functioning state institutions before embarking on big structural reforms. In this respect, Sri Lanka's ability to maintain its democracy throughout decades of war gives reason for hope. 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