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## Shape of Sri Lanka's future

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By HARSH V. PANT Special to The Japan Times LONDON &mdash; One of the world's longest running insurgencies might be coming to an end with the Sri Lankan government close to overrunning the last remaining holdouts of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) forces. The Sri Lankan military says that only 500 fighters remain in a narrow patch of territory.

By announcing a unilateral ceasefire, the Tigers have demonstrated their rapidly weakening position even as it is clear that the Sri Lankan government will accept nothing less than a surrender. A range of global and regional factors, including the changing global political climate toward extremism and terrorism since 9/11, the drying up of support and funds from the Tamil diaspora as well as Colombo's success in courting China and Pakistan to strengthen its military capabilities, has enabled the Sri Lankan government to mold the situation in its favor. Though Tamil separatism as a political ideology remains rather potent, the LTTE as a military force has gradually withered away over the past few years. The LTTE has been fighting since 1983 to create an independent state for Sri Lanka's minority Tamils, who constitute 18 percent of the island nation's population of 21 million, after decades of marginalization by governments dominated by the ethnic Sinhalese majority. It was the LTTE's promise of a "homeland for the Tamils" that spurred the Tamil diaspora into action. Their financial and moral support enabled the Tamil Tigers to emerge as a formidable terrorist organization ready to take on the entire might of the Sri Lankan state. The Tamil expatriate community has been a strong opponent of the Sri Lankan state ever since the mass Tamil exodus after the 1983 Colombo riots. Now their dream is in danger as the Sri Lankan military has virtually seized all major LTTE strongholds, marginalizing the Tigers. The strategic failure of the LTTE lies in its not reading the big picture accurately. Rather than keeping India on their side or at least neutral, the Tigers antagonized Indian public opinion in 1991 when they assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Since then the LTTE has seen its support in India dwindle significantly. Today, apart from a small fringe of sympathizers in Tamil Nadu, there is little political support for the LTTE from India. While the Sri Lankan government says Sri Lanka cannot be divided, the LTTE's aim is to carve out a Tamil homeland. India has always supported the Sri Lankan framework for a solution, given its own sensitivities over the insurgencies it faces from Kashmir to the northeast. At the global level, the LTTE has been declared a terrorist organization by 37 nations. Global crackdowns on terror networks and their funding have had a decisive impact on the ability of the Tigers to operate with efficacy. After the LTTE lost support in India, it started courting the global Sri Lankan Tamil community. Over the years, a sophisticated fundraising network evolved to support the activities of the LTTE. A network of offices and cells designed to carry out propaganda activities, raise funds and procure arms constitute this support infrastructure. The Tigers generate an estimated \$200 million to \$300 million annually in revenue from various legal and illicit fronts. But tougher legislation and law enforcement concerning LTTE financing activities in North America and Europe have contributed to waning financial support among the Tamil diaspora. Meanwhile, the Tigers' coercive and extortive practices have alienated large sections of the Tamil diaspora. LTTE links with other global terrorist networks have come to light in recent years, and reports such as those claiming that the Tigers have stolen Norwegian passports to sell to al-Qaeda have isolated the group more than ever. So, around two years ago when the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime in Colombo decided that the time for a steady military offensive had come, the LTTE was left bereft of any significant outside support base. The LTTE's decision to adopt a more conventional fighting posture vis-a-vis the much larger Sri Lankan Army seems to have led to its military rout today. The Sri Lankan Army is a much more powerful organization today than it has ever been in the past with its increased manpower and improved weapons capability. Since India is constrained due to the sensitivities of its Tamil population in providing military assistance to Colombo, its arms transfers have been limited to those with a defensive use even as China and Pakistan have emerged as main arms suppliers to Sri Lanka. Colombo has been astutely cultivating China and Pakistan over the past several years to keep India in check. Like most of India's neighbors, Colombo too has tried to balance India's regional predominance by courting extra-regional powers. China is emerging as a major player in this context, giving Sri Lanka greater strategic room to maneuver. For China, its ties with Colombo give it a foothold near crucial sea lanes in the Indian Ocean as well as an entry into what India considers its sphere of influence. It is not only supplying military hardware and training but is helping Colombo in gas exploration as well as building a modern port at Hambantota. China's arms transfers, which include fighter aircraft, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft guns, air surveillance radars, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and missiles, have proved crucial in strengthening the position of the Sri Lankan Army against the Tigers especially since the LTTE's emergence as the first terrorist organization to boast of an army, navy and air force along with a small submarine force. It is important for the Sri Lankan government now to follow up its military victory with suitable socioeconomic and political changes that can address the genuine aspirations of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Resentment over decades of marginalization and discrimination is not going to disappear anytime soon. Giving a credible voice to Tamil moderates in shaping the political future of their community within the constitutional framework of Sri Lanka would end whatever little attraction the extremist ideology of the Tigers might hold now. It is up to the Sri Lankan government now to secure peace for its future generations. Harsh V. Pant teaches at King's College London. Courtesy: Japantimes.co.jp