
Why the West will not give up

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The appalling behaviour of the West since we started to succeed in our war against terror has been deeply upsetting. In order to deal with it successfully however, we must cease to be sentimental about our old friends and patrons, and analyse why they are now being so horrid.

I believe there are six types of rationale, some of which shade into each other, not all of which are all bad. If indeed the motivation is the clearly wicked one, then there is nothing we can do about it except find support wherever we can. But if it is merely callous self-interest or even foolish altruism, then we can deal with it through showing them where enlightened self interest lies. For that however we need not only a proactive foreign policy, but also much better skills in language and argument than we can currently deploy, and which the Sri Lankans opposed to the current government, both abroad and at home, have in abundance. The most generous interpretation of current Western behaviour is that they genuinely think we are horrid, and without their little performance the Tamils would suffer dreadfully. That approach is based on the errors of the past, both the administrative measures that reduced Tamil participation in the state sector, and also the attacks on Tamils that were encouraged if not sponsored by the state in first the fifties but, more dramatically, the early eighties (when of course the West was solidly behind the then government, excusing racism on the grounds that Cold War politics demanded support for governments backing the West).. The short answer to that is that nothing of the July 1983 sort has happened since. In addition there have been administrative reforms, notably with regard to language, as to which the greatest problems arose; though there is still much to do, the fact is that the majority of Tamil parties now accept the current situation, with the possibility of peaceful reform, unlike in the eighties. Now, with the Tigers destroyed within Sri Lanka, the chances of those other parties playing a prominent role are high, and continuing attacks on the Sri Lankan government, with whom they are working, can only weaken them. The result will be strengthening of the Tiger cause, now flourishing only amongst some elements in the diaspora, but liable to burst into flame at any stage if given sufficient encouragement. The second explanation, put to me in fact by a retired diplomat from one of the countries that has been nastiest to us, is that applying pressure will lead to a better deal for the Tamils. That however is nonsense, apart from the fact that such pressure, especially when accompanied by positive references to the criminal rump of the LTTE as led by Mr Padmanathan, will only encourage further intransigence in the diaspora with continuing intimidation of the many who seek productive accommodation with the government. The last few weeks have shown that the far more sensitive and principled approach of India, giving no quarter to terrorism but consistently urging concern for the Tamils and political reform, has borne better fruit. Conversely, attempting to bludgeon Sri Lanka into submission will only lead to a strengthening of forces opposed to reform, since in defending the government against threats they will naturally expect a greater role for themselves. In short then, what might be termed the soft and kindly reasons for the current aggressive policies of the west can be seen as misguided, certainly not likely to achieve the stated motive of a better deal for the Tamils. Sadly, since one has to assume that Western policymakers are not stupid, the chances are that we have to look more seriously at the other possible motivations. The first of these is in a sense connected with the other two, though it also includes an element of selfishness, which would never be admitted to, since it effectively undermines the claim of altruism by which the West has begun to live in recent years. This particular rationale is that which claims that Western supervision is essential for a healthy outcome. Underlying this is the self-opinionated preconception that only the West knows what a healthy outcome is. Since however we know that foreign policy is not based on healthy outcomes for the world at large, but rather healthy outcomes for the policy maker, this particular rationale must obviously be suspect. In the long run, though, we must realize that that particular goal of individual foreign policy is not going to change. Rather we must show the individual countries that have now adopted a collective policy based on self interest that this relentless assault on a democratically elected government will not ensure the desired results. In fact, as pointed out above, it may contribute not only to a strengthening of terrorist forces, but also of anti-Western hard-line opinion within Sri Lanka. And, while the West may want to go for broke, and effect regime change as some amongst it sought some years back, this is increasingly unlikely given the current popularity of the elected government. A harder form of this intrusiveness can also be discerned in the single-mindedness with which the West has tried to privilege the UN and international NGOs in the management of what should be essentially internal Sri Lankan concerns. In a sense this was our fault, because after the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, and then after the tsunami too, there was an abdication of responsibility on the part of successive Sri Lankan governments. This may have been intended initially as part of Ranil Wickremesinghe's bizarre concept of a safety net (ie abandon the safe grip you have in the hope that someone will catch you as you fall) but in the case of the Kumaratunga government it was probably just the usual combination of panic and carelessness. That was when the international NGOs really stepped in, finding that they did not have to bring funds of their own, because the international community, as they called themselves, having tugged at the heartstrings of their taxpayers, did not know what to do with the largesse they had to bestow. Thus began the game of Western donors funding the UN, which subcontracted to international NGOs which, in subcontracting to national NGOs, left out the big ones (who could reasonably ask to be funded direct) and instead chose little ones they could control. And behind all this lurked the LTTE, shifted to respectable centre stage by the folly of the Wickremesinghe government in permitting it to be seen as an equal partner. Certainly the LTTE knew to play this game much better than the Sri Lankan government or national NGOs, so it set up its own little organizations which vacuumed up UN and INGO and even some bilateral donor funding. This disease took a long time to cure, not least because the more reprehensible members of the international community were trying to institutionalize it. I will discuss elsewhere one of the more obnoxious aspects of this, and how it was averted. Here let it suffice to say that the system that privileges foreign interventions still continues, and one objective of the current attacks on Sri Lanka is to strengthen this. Hence the piling up of funds with the UN which still ignores the Paris Principles on aid and the agreement of its chief executive in this

respect, Sir John Holmes, that there should be a greater role for national input. Though some of his staff may have recognized that ignoring national capacity was wrong, some donors and the bulk of the international NGOs that have profited from the current situation will not want the status quo to change. The first reason then for Western aggression is that it will help the Tamils, either through bringing our obligations before us or else through threatening us with dire consequences if we do not behave. The second reason is that the West can look after our country as a whole better than we can, and they must therefore point out all our flaws to make sure that they get to do the corrections, not Sinhalese and Tamils working together. As noted, that rationale too has soft and hard versions, one that they simply do it better, the second that they must be formally in charge to call the shots. From here sadly it is only a short hop to the third rationale, which again comes in two versions, though the last is so positively evil that it involves a qualitative leap that I hope many would not take - ie I hope that all the Westerners who slide from the soft version of the altruistic rationale to even the soft version of what I would call the creative instability rationale would not move at all to the wicked version. The soft instability rationale is based on the assumption that a world looked after by the West is better than a world in which the West looks after only itself. Since stable countries do not need looking after, some instability in areas other than the West becomes not only desirable, but something to precipitate if it will not come of itself. From this perspective, the destruction of the LTTE was unfortunate. While it continued to operate, even in a limited space, it kept Sri Lanka in a state of ferment in which all sorts of initiatives could be introduced. For countries that had lost sight of the dangers of terrorism, or which thought LTTE terrorism could be controlled by them as opposed to terrorism which might target them more directly, such a situation might have seemed to present opportunities to expand their influence. This may explain the care and concern they evinced towards the LTTE in its latter stages. Certainly the shocking performance of the British Foreign Secretary, who openly broke ranks with the international position that the LTTE should surrender, indicated that we were dealing with a different outlook on terror than in commonly claimed. Thus it was not entirely surprising that there have been attempts recently to privilege Mr Padmanathan, who seems to have taken full control of the LTTE after the death of Mr Prabhakaran, even though he is wanted by Interpol. The combination of the money he now controls and the influence of the diaspora he could be helped to command would be considerable. Sadly this position also leads on to what might be seen as the even more dangerous idea, that some sort of area controlled by the LTTE would provide an even happier hunting ground for external influences. Though this might seem unthinkable, there are obviously some Westerners who resent not just Sri Lankan stability but even the enormous potential of a solidly united and economic powerful India. There was thus almost an element of wishful thinking in the coverage of the Indian elections, which uniformly predicted an unstable situation that also involved a disproportionate influence for sectarian nationalist interests in Tamil Nadu. There was an impression then that the West did not quite understand the successful manner in which nation building has been accomplished in India, with the fissiparous tendencies of the first couple of decades after independence, when the Cold War led to such intense manipulation, no longer in operation. And yet we know how easy it is to sow dissent, to use a few determined spoilers to create problems. India has to continue to be careful, and in particular to ensure that a separate enclave in Sri Lanka is never used to rouse dangerous emotions on the mainland. To sum up then, whilst one assumes that most of those engaged in the witch hunt against Sri Lanka are full of ideals, they are also not so myopic as not to realize that their current antics can only benefit the LTTE. By keeping the pot boiling, they will ensure that moderate Tamils, in the diaspora as well as in Sri Lanka, hesitate to work together with the government or those Tamil parties that strenuously opposed the LTTE in the past. Thus the spirit of the Tigers will continue, and with the resources they still have they may well regroup. Thus the more worrying objectives outlined above should also be kept in mind as a possible consequence, not entirely unintended in at least some quarters, of the current campaign. After all pure altruism has never been a basis for foreign policy, certainly not amongst countries with long histories of exploitation. Adverse consequences for those still seen as alien will be seen as of minimal concern, as compared with the expansion of power and influence through whatever means lie at hand. If these include sanctimoniousness, so much the better for clothing what ultimately amounts to determined self-interest. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process