Winning the War, Winning the Peace

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by: Dayan Jayatilleka "The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew, cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down". – Barack Obama, Berlin, July 24 2008We must not settle for a draw in a game we can win and are winning. As we draw closer to victory, those who wish to deny it to us will intensify their efforts.

Let us do everything that can help us win the war, and desist from anything that may prevent or divert us. We also need a vision for winning the peace. Our vision for winning the peace will play a part in helping or hindering the winning of the war. Our postwar program will affect the outcome of the war, not least by influencing the behaviour of external powers (one of which actively saved Prabhakaran in 1987). Victory is imperative and yet not inevitable. It is more than possible; it is probable. Yet, the war is not won as long as Prabhakaran is alive. As long as he is alive, he can recruit and continue to fight. People will follow him. A guerrilla war waged under Prabhakaran’s leadership is a rather different prospect from one waged by a post-Prabhakaran LTTE. From the outset of his struggle – whether one dates it back to the 1970s or the early ’80s – right up to 1990, Prabhakaran proved a maestro of guerrilla war, doing what was thought impossible in a relatively limited area of a small island. His performance against the IPKF was as a classic guerrilla fighter, and his tactics since, even when waging semi-conventional war, have never lost the unorthodox guerrilla style. As long as he is alive, the dream of Tamil Eelam, a separate country carved out from ours – the only one we will ever have – will never die. That dream, our nightmare, will begin to die only when he is no more. It will remain only in the cyberspace fantasies of the Tamil Diaspora, a computer game. For now, there must only be one objective in view: the military defeat and destruction of the Tigers. Moderate devolution helps and does not hinder the war effort because it brings India over to our side or at least keeps it benignly neutral. There are two forces who do not want closer relations between India and Sri Lanka: the LTTE and pro-Tiger elements in Tamil Nadu, such as Mr. Vaiko on the one hand, and sundry Sinhala chauvinists and xenophobes on the other. The latter do the job of the former. The Movement for Devolution Barack Obama urged Europeans to join Americans to remake the world in his speech last week in Berlin. The speech drew more than 200,000 people.A UN Under Secretary-General from a country which is among Sri Lanka’s staunchest friends, gave me some good advice (prompted by warm recollections of my father): draw the line, defend your core interests, make no concessions on them; but do make concessions short of those core interests so that you give your friends something to defend you with. Our core interest is to win the war. It is one thing to resist external pressure from whichever quarter far or near, that wishes us to stop the war or retard its pace or restrict its objectives to something short of victory. That sort of pressure impinges directly on our core security interests, and must be resisted by any means necessary. However, signals that are short of that, which have nothing or little to do with the war, must be treated with sensitivity and accommodated to the fullest degree possible. Moderate, realistic devolution is the classic case in point. Strategic wisdom has it that he who seeks to defend everything, defends nothing. Those who oppose everything and everyone gain nothing and jeopardize everything. Those who seek to obstruct moderate devolution will almost certainly help obstruct victory in the war. This is why the launch of the Movement for Devolution, a pro-devolution caucus of Government Ministers —Rajitha Senaratne, Douglas Devananda, Tissa Vitharana, DEW Gunasekara, Dilan Perera— who support the war, the President and devolution, is to be greatly welcomed. Devolution is too important to be left to appeasers and NGOs, while the war is too important to be left to interpretation by chauvinists. Power sharing and Nation building While Tamil separatism must be rolled back and overcome, Sinhala and Tamil nationalism have to be contained if one is to build a Sri Lankan national identity and consciousness. They can be contained only by being accommodated to some degree. Tamil nationalism can be contained only by a sufficiency of devolved power and resources. We must share power with one another so as to build a nation with and for us all. It is a myth that devolution is advocated only by India and/or the West. When Lakshman Kadirgamar sent a delegation to Pakistan in 2005 as a guest of the (Defense-funded) Institute of Strategic Studies of Dr. Shireen Mazari, one of the questions we were asked by an intelligent young Minister of State for Foreign Affairs was why Sri Lanka did not learn from Pakistan’s federal model. That is not to say that we must be blind to its faults, but we must understand that it is not only Tamil Nadu, or the Tamil Diaspora influenced West, or the Christian churches or the INGOs, that wish us to share power with and grant adequate political space to the Tamil people. Dramatic Setting - The Victory Column faces the Brandenburg Gate, where President Reagan delivered his famous speech urging Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down" the Berlin Wall.No devolution or too little, and communities will break away. Too much devolution and they will do the same. The degree of devolution at the periphery depends on the character of the mainstream. If one implements a strictly secular Republicanism as does France, and one is a French citizen with equal rights irrespective of ethnicity, then the need for substantive devolution at the periphery is virtually non-existent (though Corsica would doubtless disagree). However, if a society insists that the culture, language and civilization of its majority must have some built-in preference, then it is unrealistic to expect that those who do not belong to that culture but are inhabitants of the country would feel themselves fully integrated and un-alienated citizens. Full integration can only take place on the basis of full equality, and a citizenship that is blind to ethnic origin, religion and language. If the State and citizenship are not blind or even-handed but biased, then it is unavoidable that there will be demands by minorities for their own political space at the periphery. Wild illogic asks the question as to why Sri Lanka should devolve when Prabhakaran is not asking for devolution. Others equally irrationally speculate that Prabhakaran really wants devolution as an escape hatch. Worst of all some actually hold both – mutually exclusive and contradictory – views. The evidence of decades is plain. If Prabhakaran were willing to accept devolution even when he was militarily disadvantaged, he would not have waged war against the IPKF. The other argument, that devolution is unnecessary because Prabhakaran does not want it, is a model of utter irrelevance. When there is a general strike, one grants a realistic wage increase not

because the most radical "wildcat" strikers want it or would settle for it but because the vast majority of rank and file workers and moderate trade unions would settle for it, thereby undercutting the extremists. When the strike is reduced to a hard core of extremists, it can be brought quickly to a close. So it is with separatist struggle and devolution. To win the war, our successful military track has to be paralleled by a political one which proceeds with the same purposiveness and at the same speed. If our neighbours and the world think that a military victory for the Sri Lankan state is tantamount to a Sinhala /Sinhala Buddhist victory over the Tamils/minorities, we may be denied that victory by external economic and coercive pressure, as we once were twenty years ago. A moderate, rational political program containing a progressive vision for Sri Lanka’s post-war future is a necessary component for bringing this war to a successful close; for winning this war. Don’t lose the peace Xenophobia, cultural or otherwise, is profoundly counter-productive for winning the war as well as the peace. Scholarly and scientific research has shown that creativity and innovation in all fields take place not so much from within the bowels of homogeneous and unchanging cultures but precisely where cultures interface, interact, exchange and cross-fertilize. Sir Arthur C. Clarke correctly observed that Sri Lanka contains the greatest cultural diversity in the most compressed space, which is a source of conflict but potentially also of great creativity. Unless we embrace pluralism, learn to celebrate the treasure that is our own diversity, and tap into it as an energy source for advance, we shall certainly be unable compete regionally or globally. Worst of all, we shall not be using all our cultural capacities, making the best of our endowments, making the best of ourselves. The best performing of our youngsters, the brightest minds coming out of our universities with First classes, are migrating. Unless we can retain them by creating an environment in which the intelligent discerning internationally aware individual can flourish, we may win the war but lose the capacity to re-build, regenerate. Post-war Sri Lanka must not be like pre-war Sri Lanka, because that order was so flawed as to contain the seeds of war. As we reconstruct we must restructure, transform, learning from past mistakes. Similarly, post-war Sri Lanka must be unlike wartime Sri Lanka. If ideologies of resentment and closure prevail over those of conciliation and openness, we shall be unable to manage the problem of the haemorrhage of quality human resources, which in turn will decide whether we shall develop or decline as a country. It will serve little purpose if we win the war and lose the peace. For those who think that Sri Lanka can win the war on the basis of a program and vision of inequity between peoples, of enforced cultural homogeneity in a heterogeneous society; for those who believe that Sri Lanka can return to its pre-war order or build an unfair unequal post-war one; for those who assume that closed minds and cultural exclusivity can sustain our country in the 21st century, I have little time and no more arguments but only two words, which must be marked well: Barack Obama. The American Candidate: Barack in Berlin Barack Obama left the USA for the Middle East and Europe as a candidate described as African-American but in Europe he was re-defined and reborn as what he is: the American candidate. Leonard Cohen’s song says "First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin". Obama seems to be reversing that trajectory of triumph. Let him speak for himself, in his own words -- highly acclaimed as statesmanlike -- delivered (without a note) to the two hundred thousand strong crowd in Berlin’s Tiergarten on July 24th: "…Tonight, I speak to you not as a candidate for President, but as a citizen – a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world. "…I know that I don’t look like the Americans who’ve previously spoken in this great city. The journey that led me here is improbable. My mother was born in the heartland of America, but my father grew up herding goats in Kenya. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British…" "…The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down." "…Our allegiance has never been to any particular tribe or kingdom – indeed, every language is spoken in our country; every culture has left its imprint on ours; every point of view is expressed in our public squares. What has always united us – what has always driven our people; what drew my father to America’s shores – is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please." Obama points the way for Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. For the Tamils, the relevance and example should be clear: abandon projects of separatist walling-off, integrate into the mainstream, fight against discrimination and for equal rights, regard oneself as a Sri Lankan and compete as one. The African–Americans experienced slavery and segregation and still encounter racism, but Barack Obama’s example is to transcend that experience, which was historically far worse than anything suffered by Tamils. His is the model of our martyred Lakshman Kadirgamar (whose oration for devolution in the Parliamentary debate on the August 2000 Draft Constitution is cunningly ignored by Sinhalese chauvinists). It can come to the forefront only when Kadirgamar’s assassins, the Tigers, are defeated. What is the lesson and example for the Sinhalese? Barack Obama, perhaps the most intellectually gifted politician in today’s world and potentially a philosopher-president in the Platonic sense, ushers in a new model of cultural globalization and globalized culture of and for the 21st century. He is the modern, Multiethnic, Multi-Cultural Man, emerging from the melting pot meritocracy that is America. However, this is not an exclusively American Dream. It is not essentially different from the multiracialism of Cuba’s Fidel Castro and South Africa’s Nelson Mandela, or that of Jawaharlal Nehru, without whose inclusive, pluralist, secular, rational, modern leadership vision for an ancient, culturally rich society, India would not be the Asian success story and the 21st century miracle it has become.
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[These are the strictly personal views of the writer].

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