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## Sri Lanka: Sources of hope, reasons for optimism

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by: Dayan Jayatilleka While I worry and agonize about the country and its prospects — a habit of decades — I refuse to succumb to the pessimism that seems to consume most commentators writing in English on Sri Lankan affairs. That pessimism and negativism stems from two broad sources. Insofar as several are pacifist "civil society" liberals as distinct from Realist or pragmatic liberals (such as Barack Obama), they lament the Sri Lankan armed forces military drive and the prospects of a Sri Lankan military victory over the LTTE, preferring a ceasefire and negotiated solution between the two belligerents. These critics have been joined by Sri Lankan commentators who mistakenly see a parallel between the policies and ideology of the Rajapaksa administration and those of the Bush administration. Not only do they confuse an internal war of self-defense and reunification against secessionist terrorism with a war of aggression against a sovereign country, their perspective is very far from the pragmatic liberalism of the Obama ticket. My guarded optimism stems from a Neo-Realist perspective. Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe, a far more astute academic and analyst than activist in political or civil society (a book edited by him is in the UN Bookstore here in Geneva) used to resignedly term me a Realist, during the many debates and discussions we had at public seminars on conflict in Colombo. He was not referring to realism in the common or garden sense, but in the precise sense of the well known perspective on world politics; one that is focused on the centrality of power and the state. He was only partly correct, because I would fit more strictly into the school of Neo-Realism, which combines the perspective of power and the state with the recognition of the importance of ideas, ideology and non-state actors. There is a more recent scholarly tendency with which I would be even more comfortable, which calls itself Ethical Realism (e.g. Anatole Lieven), except that it is a trifle too self-congratulatory since the best of the modern Realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, dealing as they did with questions of nuclear weapons and war after Hiroshima, wrestled heavily with questions of "just war" ethics and power. The central vice of Sri Lankan cosmopolitan liberalism-progressivism is that it has no equivalent of the Obama-Biden US Democrat perspective on National Security. Any one with even a cursory acquaintance of the US Presidential election campaign will be aware that Senators Obama and Biden have attacked the Republican candidate on national security issues, pointing out that a needless war on Iraq had undermined the necessary war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Why necessary? Because it was these forces that attacked the USA on 9/11 and still intend to do so if they possess the capability, while Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. The Democrats have criticized the Republicans for being diverted from the task of "capturing or killing" Osama Bin Laden, tasks which they have pledged themselves to achieve (the terms are from Senator Obama's first debate, echoed by Senator Biden in his Veep debate). In his dramatically delivered concluding speech at the Democratic convention, Senator Obama accused war hero John McCain of saying he will "go through the gates of hell after Bin Laden" but of not being "ready to go to the mouth of the cave he (Bin Laden) is hiding in". Rightly or wrongly, wisely or imprudently, Senator Obama reiterated in the first face-to-face Presidential debate, his pledge to take out Osama Bin Laden, if "there is actionable intelligence" that he is in a location across the Pakistani border; if "he is in the cross hairs" and the Pakistani authorities are not going to do the job". H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Sri Lanka's Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva An authentic Lankan liberal or social democratic stand would weave its secular criticisms into a resounding endorsement of the Rajapaksa leadership for "going after" with a view to "capturing or killing" Velupillai Prabhakaran, for the latter's repeated attacks on the Sri Lankan state and society, his repeated return to war abandoning negotiations, and his serial murders and maiming of Sri Lankan leaders of all ethnicities. Some enlightened and literate Sri Lankan commentators ("erudite but not analytical" as Regi Siriwardene once opined of Kumari Jayawardena in the pages of the Lanka Guardian), Sinhala and Tamil, in their legitimate concern over recrudescing Sinhala chauvinism, have even raised doubts as to whether the ongoing war is a just one, and go on to equate, implicitly or explicitly, the warring sides. Even if one concedes that there is a Sinhala hegemonic striving or project resurgent or lurking in the wings, that is not the, or even a criterion for the assessment of the just or unjust character of a war. The almost uniquely diligent research of Noam Chomsky unearthed the Grand Area Planning documents of the USA which, as early as 1940, thought through the World War and "forward planned" out the post-war order as one that would permit US capital free mobility throughout the world, dismantling its rivals, fascism and the old colonial empires. Chomsky sees these documents as the foundations of US hegemonic foreign policy to date. However, neither the hegemonic project that arguably under-girded the US intervention in the Second World War, nor its heinous tactics at the closing, namely the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nor indeed the resurgence of Great Russian patriotism, nor the reprehensible conduct of some Red Army soldiers in the counter-onslaught through Germany, can reverse History's verdict of the Allied war as a Just War. The Second World War remains a just one because of the aggression by the enemy (Poland, Pearl Harbor, Operation Barbarossa), the nature of the enemy — Fascism — the impossibility of a negotiated solution given that nature, the undesirability of a negotiated solution which would have entailed an accommodation with or surrender to an enemy of that character (History reviles Munich), and the far greater price that humanity would have paid had the enemy won, given the character and conduct of that enemy. These are the very same factors that render the ongoing war of the Sri Lankan state against the LTTE, a Just War, whatever the subjective strivings and motivations of its various actors. While I am on the matter of the subjective strivings of actors, I must add that I know of hardly any military chief in any ideological system anywhere in the world that did not hold more hawkish, hard-line views, narrower and less nuanced than those of the political leadership. That seems to come with the territory: the rough and ready military ethos, the practice of war, and the imperative need to motivate the rank and file soldiery. (Gen. David Petraeus, PhD, is a notable exception). So long as it does not translate itself into state policy, it should not be taken as the key indicator, though it must of course not be ignored or swept under the rug. The pessimism, negativism and hostility of most commentators stem from concerns over

the unresolved Tamil ethnic/nationalities Question, the revival of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism, the nature of the post war/post conflict order, the economic prospects, and the quality of domestic governance. While I recognize the salience of these issues and legitimacy of these concerns—and have in my writings cautioned of the need not only of "Winning The War" but also of "Winning the Peace" —a Neo-Realist perspective tells me that the best we can hope for is a situation of checks and balances, of the balance of power, of tenuous equilibrium. My analysis is that powerful factors, objective and subjective, will balance out, resulting in an equilibrium which may not be the best of all possible syntheses but will keep us from plunging over the precipice into the beckoning darkness. One man's or woman's problem is another's solution. Every problem identified by critics and commentators is in fact a solution to another problem. There are several problems that have been identified as plaguing Sri Lanka, though partisan and ideological polarization is such that few analysts identify all these as problems: the Tiger threat, Sinhala and Tamil ultra-nationalism (in whichever order), issues of domestic governance and living standards, Sri Lanka's external relations, the crisis of education. Of these, in any society, the equivalent of the Tiger threat to security and territorial integrity would be considered the most serious and pressing. The Tiger threat is the most pressing in that it challenges the most basic attributes of the state (territory, monopoly of violence) and causes the gravest physical damage, loss of life and financial resources to society. We are at "the beginning of the end" for the LTTE, as Secy/Defence, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa has put it. I cannot see how one cannot regard positively, the real —though not irreversible or inevitable— prospect and probability of military victory over the LTTE and the overcoming thereby of the most proximate and pressing problem the country has faced in its contemporary history. Whatever it recommends to us (and hypocritically preaches the exact opposite to the Pakistani government), the West would be mightily pleased if it were to achieve our degree of success in Afghanistan. We have also shown ourselves to have more resolve in relation to the Tigers than our giant neighbour who has not brought to justice, Prabhakaran, the man who ordered the murder of a former Prime Minister and grandson of a great founding father. A Neo-Realist reading also acknowledges that the fight back against the Tigers and the probability of victory is in great measure owed to Sinhala nationalism. Therefore what is seen as a curse by many cosmopolitan commentators is actually a mixed blessing. While the Sri Lankan state is prevailing over the Tigers, it is dishonest not to recognize that the strength of Sinhala nationalism, or Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, has been the main driving force of this performance insofar as it is the main motivational well spring for the largely Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan armed forces. A Realist or Neo-Realist would recognize as utopian the assumption that it could have been otherwise for a drive to victory rather than to fruitless negotiations. To illustrate, it is the Soviet Union that broke the back of the Nazi German army in Stalingrad, but one of the driving forces of the Red Army's performance was the renewal of Great Russian nationalism (thus the Great Patriotic War) under/by Joseph Stalin. I say Sinhala nationalism has been the main (as distinct from sole) driver because there is another factor in the mix which Sinhala nationalists fail to give due credit to: the Eastern Tamil rebellion led by Karuna; the anti-autocratic striving within Tamil nationalism. The strength of Sinhala nationalism will balance off yet another danger to the wellbeing and welfare of Sri Lanka's state and society. This is the political, social and electoral challenge posed by the ultra Right, the neo-liberals who during their two years in office practiced the kind of market fundamentalism that has led to the meltdown of the US financial system. These neo-liberals are also neo-compradors who will sell out Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity at the slightest opportunity, already proved their propensity for the appeasement of Tiger separatism. They will, if elected, generate a powerful populist Sinhala chauvinist backlash of a neo-fascist character. However, given the image and character of the current leadership of the bloc of the UNP and SLFP Right, and the UNP's collaborationist fifth columnist "antiwar" ideology (Vajira Abeywardena, MP told The Island recently that the war cannot be won), strong Sinhala nationalist revulsion will probably prevent their election to office or assumption of power by extra-parliamentary means. That then is the second positive feature of Sinhala nationalism. The third is as bulwark against external interventionism. This can emanate from two sources: Tamil Nadu and the West. A Neo-Realist reckoning would recognize that there are people, elements and forces in Tamil Nadu which hate the Sinhalese and support Tamil Eelam. As a mere glance at websites would demonstrate, this is also true of the bulk of the Tamil Diaspora. These are permanent threats to Sri Lanka which have to be squarely faced. Sinhala identity and consciousness is a powerful defensive factor when facing these existential threats. The Tamil Diaspora may combine with Western antipathy to Sri Lanka's patriotic, anti-imperialist Presidency, to urge interventionism. Bob Rae, a prominent personality of Canada's Liberal party has written to the Canadian Prime Minister criticizing him for non-advocacy and non-pursuit by Canada of the "Responsibility to Protect" with regard to Darfur and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is not a fragmented and failing or failed state, nor is it a state which been independent only briefly and intermittently as has Georgia. Here, for better or worse, the nation came before the state, giving the nation-state an organic and historical core. Any coercive external intervention will sooner or later come up against that fact and its powerful contemporary reassertion as consciousness and armed agency. The fourth positive feature of Sinhala nationalism is as a check on Tamil ultra-nationalism, just as Tamil nationalism will be a check on Sinhala ultra-nationalism. Contrary to the hopes of some and fears of others, populist Sinhala nationalism will be unable to semi-permanently mask the internal weaknesses and dysfunctions that trouble us. The end of the conventional/semi conventional mid-intensity military challenge to the Sri Lankan state will at one and the same time bring to the surface matters of domestic policy and governance, exacting an electoral price, the prospect or postscript of which will propel corrective change. Reciprocally, Tamil nationalism will act as a check on Sinhala ultranationalist strivings and projects. Electoral democracy will be both agency and arena of these checks and balances. Though the current administration, given the political reality of its coalitional character, has been less than strident on devolution, it has preserved (one may say restored) and actually reactivated the basic unit of devolution and autonomy, the Provincial Councils. Tamil local nationalism and anti-despotism in the form of the Karuna rebellion, and Sinhala nationalism as a motivator of the Armed Forces' rollback of the Tigers, combined to make this re-opening of democratic space possible. That is a historic achievement and cannot be minimized because the

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Government has not filled this cleared space with devolved power. Sinhala ultra-nationalist preferences notwithstanding, the Provincial Councils constitute a "floor" below which the administration and the Sri Lankan state will not and cannot go. Nor should it go too far above this floor, beyond autonomy: as Bolivia and Ecuador remind us, excessive autonomy can be the launch pad for reactionary, even fascistic secessionism. In post-war conditions, the competitive character of electoral politics among Tamil parties will necessitate sensitivity to Tamil aspirations and a more or less accurate reflection of them, be they primary ones of welfare and development or of collective identity or a mixture of both. At the same time, Tamil and Muslim representation at all levels of the polity through elections on the basis of proportional representation provide an automatic enabler of devolution, insofar as the Sinhala candidates and parties will vie with each other for minority votes and the support of minority parties. If sufficiently strong, the minority parties could unite conditionally with a mainstream Southern party to successfully press for a brand new Constitutional architecture. As for fantasies of the restoration of the first past the post electoral system which takes for majority hegemony, all that the minority parties have to do is vote against it in parliament, blocking the needed two-thirds majority. Electoral competition reflecting the pressures of pent-up wartime social demands, the needs of post-war reconstruction and participation in the world economy, combined with the renewed availability of foreign investment and tourism, will provide the propellant and prosperity needed for domestic improvement and reform. Finally, what of Sinhala ultra-nationalism, chauvinism, or hegemonism? While on the one hand Tamil ultra-nationalism, especially in the Diaspora, overestimates the international factor and underestimates the internal factor; the national, domestic and demographic power realities of the island of Sri Lanka, on the other hand, Sinhala ultranationalists have no understanding of the external factor, the international realities and Sri Lanka's overall strategic environment. Just as Sinhala nationalism will prevail over the Tigers and hold in check Tamil ultra-nationalism, Rightwing neo-liberalism/collaborationism, and external interventionism, Sinhala majoritarian supremacism in its Parliamentary forms and extra-Parliamentary fantasies will be held in check and countervailed by the realities of power including the power of ideas, i.e. by soft power and hard power. The latest issue, Sept/Oct 2008, of the prestigious Foreign Policy magazine, published by the Carnegie Endowment has the following to say in its main feature: "Otto von Bismarck once famously predicted that the most important geopolitical fact of the 20th century would be that the United States and Britain spoke the same language. Now, the values shared by United States and India may emerge as the most important geopolitical fact of this century". (Foreign Policy, Sept/Oct 2008, page 32). The story notes the formation of a US-India military alliance, the treaty to share nuclear materials, and projected military sales to India over the next decade which total US \$ 100 billion (yep, that's a hundred billion). Sri Lanka cannot sustain itself on the very doorstep of this grand geopolitical fact if it attempts to translate the values of Sinhala chauvinism into policy practice. Any Realist or Neo-Realist analysis tells us that an asymmetry of the values of Sinhala chauvinism and the Indo-US alliance, compounding and compounded by the spill over effect in a part of India — Tamil Nadu — of Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic grievances, can end only one way. If on the other hand, Sri Lanka realistically modifies its mindset, undertakes a "mind-shift" to fit into or be compatible with those shared values, the prospects of catch up and lift-off are enormous. This "most important geopolitical fact", this massive reality of ratios of power, holds true whether or not there is a change in Washington in less than a month's time. Such a change will sharpen and accelerate the process I refer to above. That possible change, a Revolution of Reason at the heart of the international system, the USA, will embody and globalize a new Zeitgeist which will not only reveal the ideology of archaic majoritarianism as absurdly nonsensical but will render it utterly unsustainable. Time and space are running out for both Tamil Tiger terrorism and Sinhala chauvinist hegemonism. The only problem is that it's a bit of a race — and the pun is intended. ----- (These are the strictly personal views of the writer)(Courtesy : The Island , Department of Government Information , The Lanka Guardian , Trans Currents )