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## Indo-Lanka equation: Time for a trade-off

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by: Dayan Jayatileka "I will kill Osama Bin Laden.

I will smash Al Qaeda"

- Barack Obama

(2nd Presidential debate, Oct 7th 2008) The time has come for a trade-off, a grand bargain. We must hold fast on the military offensive while conceding on the political. We must concede on the political so as to be able to preserve and safeguard the ongoing military effort. Let me back up a bit and explain my point. Sri Lanka faces twin tasks: to complete the military offensive against the Tigers crowning it with victory and to secure the time and space to do so without external interference and pressure. The latter is even more pressing than the former. Without fulfilling the latter, we would not have the conditions necessary to complete the former task.

The objectives are territorial unity, integrity and sovereignty. We have to complete our offensive to reunite the territory and re-establish territorial integrity, while safeguarding national sovereignty. The challenge facing Sri Lanka today is to preserve the political, diplomatic and strategic space necessary to complete the military campaign to defeat the LTTE. Plainly put, it is to avoid a replay or a variation of a 1987 scenario, in which a potentially decisive Sri Lankan military thrust was aborted by external intervention, itself catalyzed by sub-regional political pressure. How to best manage relations with India, in this complex situation? On the one hand, Sri Lanka must decide on what is absolutely fundamental to it and stick to that determinedly, against whatever odds and whatever the outcome. On the other hand, it must be flexible enough to concede and sacrifice on issues other than those core interests. What is of fundamental interest is the strategic and security issue. The overwhelming bulk of the Sri Lankan people want to see the war fought to a successful end. We cannot and must not compromise on the goals, timing, intensity, weapons and tactics of the war. We must not declare a ceasefire and enter talks with the Tigers unless Prabhakaran and his commanders surrender and are brought to justice before the courts. We must not blink and must be willing to offer asymmetric resistance in all dimensions to all who would abort our military's effort to bring peace and unity to our little island home. However, no perspective can be judged patriotic unless it is also realistic. What is the reality? As I have said before it is this: The Tamils matter far more than the Sinhalese to Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu matters more than Colombo to New Delhi. New Delhi matters far more than Sri Lanka to every capital in the world. The other reality is that New Delhi has overwhelming military superiority over Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka has no one who will or can countervail that absolute military superiority. That being the case, how to best balance Sri Lanka's vital interests with India's mounting concerns? This is where my suggestion of a trade-off comes in. Calling off, or pausing, or lowering the intensity of the military operations is tantamount to letting Prabhakaran off the hook. This ensures that he will continue to kill and will blight the future of another generation of Sri Lankans. The war must be stopped when the democratic Sri Lankan state has won. This is true of any state fighting any terrorist movement—whatever the underlying cause of those movements—anywhere in the South Asian region. South Asia needs a clear victory against terrorism, somewhere, anywhere in the region. Compelling a legitimate state, a durable democracy at that, to abandon or slow down the military struggle against a separatist terrorist army or militia anywhere in our region, damages the anti-terrorist and anti-separatist causes and emboldens terrorism everywhere in the region. That being said, Sri Lanka simply must be willing to trade off the political for the military, or to put it more accurately, it must be willing to trade off secondary political aims for primary or core political concerns. The core political concern is the unity and territorial integrity of the Sri Lankan state and its sovereign right in matters of internal war and peace. The secondary political consideration is the internal structural arrangements of the Sri Lanka state, as pertains to center-periphery or majority-minority relations. I refer of course to the issue of devolution of power and autonomy arrangements for the Tamil people. Realistically, we have to help Delhi help us, which means help Delhi with Tamil Nadu. Devolution is all we have to offer, if we are to safeguard the ongoing military campaign. It is true that any devolution package cannot be fully implemented while Prabhakaran is still in business. This after all is what happened to the Indo-Lanka Accord. But we can chart the contours of a constitutionally feasible devolution, do so within a compressed time frame and clearly commit to it, so that there is transparency about the postwar order. India and the world must know the political outcome of the war, and must be reassured that the result will not be Sinhala "rulership" over the Tamils. This will help Delhi stave off Tamil Nadu pressure. We are at a crossroads. President Jayewardene suddenly found himself confronted with a choice: either risk the decimation of Sri Lankan military assets at the hands of a vastly superior external force or capitulate, call off the war, sign on the dotted line. We know what he did and what resulted in terms of a Southern backlash and civil war. If President Jayewardene had a choice he would have signed the Indo-Lanka accord and agreed to the 13th amendment before the airdrop and not after it. Had he done so before, he would not have had to abandon the military operation, and we could have gone on to win the war. There are those who will oppose and resist any and all concessions and compromises, military and political. Almost to a man and a woman these are elements that have no knowledge or comprehension of international and strategic affairs. That learning disability is deadly dangerous. We have to decide between, on the one hand, the basic interests of the Sri Lankan state and its military, and on the other, the ideology and prejudices of Sinhala chauvinism. National interest and national security or majoritarian ethnic ideology? That is the choice facing us. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer.)(Courts : The Island )