



BULLETIN

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End of Sri Lankan Civil War—International Aspects

by Patryk Kugiel

May 2009 saw an end to the civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka from 1983. With the Tamil Tigers defeated militarily, prospects for a lasting peace will hinge on the implementation of political reforms which would respect the aspirations of the Tamil minority and reflect the coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups. The international community has an important role to play in the country's economic recovery and stabilization, and also in supporting the internal political process. At the same time, the Sri Lankan developments provide testimony to a growing regional rivalry between China and India.

After 26 years of a civil war that brought death to nearly 100,000 people, Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa on 19 May 2009 proclaimed the final defeat of the Tamil Tigers and announced the death of their leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The government forces regained control of the country's whole territory, the LTTE structures were broken and most of its leaders eliminated, all which makes the organization's resurrection exceedingly unlikely. But lasting stabilization and peace in a highly divided society, where the Sinhalese account for 74% of the population and the Tamils for 18%, will be contingent on the adoption of political arrangements ending the discrimination suffered by the Tamil minority and also by the Muslim community (8% of the population).

Tamil Tigers. Established in 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have sought to form an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka's north and east. From 1983, the organization was engaged in open warfare against the Colombo government, which it conducted on three fronts: political campaign, guerrilla war, and acts of terrorism. Ranked among the richest, most numerous and best organized terrorist organizations in the world—with 2007 income estimated at some US\$200–300 million and membership at between 7,000 and 15,000—it controlled a quarter of the country's territory and two-thirds of its coastline (as of 2005), where a quasi-state operated with its own administration, police, judiciary, central bank, and even modest air and naval forces. The LTTE resorted also to mass-scale suicide attacks. In more than 200 such attacks carried out by its special commando, Black Tigers, hundreds of people were killed, including the Sri Lankan president, a former prime minister of India, several government ministers and members of parliament. As a result, the LTTE was designated as terrorist organization by more and more countries, including India in 1992, the U.S. in 1997, the UK in 2001, and Canada (as well as the European Union) in 2006. That rendered more difficult the flow of money transfers from the Tamil diaspora around the world, a major source of funding for the Tigers, which proved one of the causes of the organization's defeat.

Fiasco of Peace Initiatives. During the conflict, the Sri Lankan government made four unsuccessful attempts to end the war politically, including two initiatives involving third countries. In 1987–1990, it was India (initially supporting the LTTE), which sent a peacekeeping force contingent to the island—but the intervention ended up in a failure, both militarily (a loss of some 1,200 men in a guerrilla war against the LTTE) and diplomatically (deterioration in official relations with Sri Lanka). Norway joined the picture towards the end of the 1990s, and its efforts led to the signing of a cease-fire agreement between the warring parties. The truce formally continued until January 2008, although peace talks collapsed right in 2004, with hostilities resumed in mid-2006.

In hindsight, it looks like both the Indian military intervention and the Norwegian civilian mission actually provided conditions for the LTTE's consolidation, thus contributing to an intensification and prolongation of the conflict. President Rajapaksa, elected in 2005, changed tactics: he rejected successive political negotiations with the LTTE and, in early 2008, ordered the Sri Lankan army to crush the Tigers. The government successfully deflected the international community's pressure and calls to stop fighting and restore political dialogue. Despite a continuing humanitarian crisis—some 15,000 civilians have died since 2008, with several dozen thousand trapped in the area of fighting—and accusations of human rights violations, the army pressed on with the offensive until final victory.

International Consequences. The end of the Sri Lankan conflict signals positive changes, especially for India. In the aftermath of the unsuccessful military intervention, India's policy towards Sri Lanka has been passive and riven by internal contradictions: on the one hand, the country's internal considerations (such as a large Tamil minority in the south) suggested an active support for Sri Lankan Tamils, but on the other, the geopolitical situation, conflict with the LTTE and the desire to maintain its influence on the island prodded India towards keeping good relations with the Colombo government. In consequence, India took the path of non-interference in the southern neighbor's internal affairs, while simultaneously calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Mutual relations concentrated on economic matters, with India becoming Sri Lanka's top trading partner and fourth largest investor on the island. And during the recent Sri Lankan army offensive, despite official criticism of military solutions, India provided limited support for the government forces, primarily in the form of non-offensive equipment (e.g. radars), intelligence sharing and stronger sea border control.

With the civil war ended and the LTTE eliminated, India will now be able to pursue a more active policy. By demanding devolution and greater Tamil autonomy within a single state, the country may become the main representative of the Tamil minority and guarantor of its needs being heeded. It also has an opportunity to regain the recently weakened influence and increase its involvement, also in the political and military dimensions—especially given its serious misgivings about China's growing presence on the island.

It is from China and Pakistan that the biggest supplies of arms and munitions came during the Sri Lankan army's final offensive—and this, at a time when the international community showed far reaching restraint. China also backed Sri Lanka politically, e.g. by blocking UN initiatives critical to that country, and increased the extent of its economic involvement, including in the construction of US\$1bn port in Hambantota, in the southern part of the island. After receiving access to the port for its navy, which is likely, China is going to strengthen its control of the strategic sea route to the Middle East and Africa. And this is one in a whole series of China's strategic portal investments—such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Sittwe (Myanmar)—which dynamically increase the country's presence in the Indian Ocean, traditionally seen by India as its own zone of influence. Sri Lanka has thus become yet another area for Sino-Indian rivalry. The "dialogue partner" status, granted Sri Lanka at the latest meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2009, may come as an indication of China's intentions to further strengthen the close relations built with that country in recent years.

Conclusions. The break-up of the radical organization LTTE offers the chance that the political processes will open leading to society's gradual reintegration and durable internal stabilization. Otherwise, Sri Lanka may witness a gradual resurgence of separatism and, perhaps, another civil war. The reforms should lead to democratization, decentralization and economic growth. But economic recovery in conflict-ravaged areas will not be possible without international support. The organizations and countries with a longstanding record of development aid for Sri Lanka (e.g. the EU, the World Bank, the US, Norway and Japan) will have to redouble their efforts for reconstruction and development. Economic assistance may actually prove to be the most effective instrument for the West to stimulate and back internal reforms.

Sri Lanka's geopolitical importance is going to increase steadily, a result of its geopolitical position by a major Indian Ocean route accounting for a half of the global container-transport traffic and close to 70% of oil shipments. The end of the civil war offers a chance for the country's stabilization and economic development, while at the same time the threats involved in a regional Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean are on the rise.