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Question and Answer

The question:

On 19/5/2009 speaking on state television Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared victory against the Tamil Tigers. He said, "Our motherland has been completely liberated from separatist terrorism." The state television also broadcasted images of the Tamil Tiger leader's body after it was recovered from the battlefield. "A few hours ago, the body of terrorist leader (Velupillai) Prabhakaran, who ruined this country, was found on the battleground," army Chief Gen. Sarath Fonseka told state television. In his victory speech the President Rajapaksa was anxious to strike a reconciliatory tone with Tamil people. He said,"Our intention was to save the Tamil people from the cruel grip of the (rebels). We all must now live as equals in this free country."

What is the reality of the conflict in Sri Lanka? Is it a local or regional conflict or an international conflict? In who's favor was the result of this conflict? Is it possible to say that the conflict in the island has come to an end or not?

The answer:

To answer these questions we shall say:

1- The Sri Lankan conflict has often been portrayed as a protracted conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the militant movements of Sri Lankan's Tamil population. However, in reality the conflict is a classic Anglo-American struggle to control the strategic waterways of Sri Lanka and has been fought with the aid regional proxy powers such as India and Pakistan.

2- Sri Lanka's importance lies in its location. It is situated about 19 miles off the southern coast of India thus overlooking one of the most important sea routes between West Asia and South East Asia. It is separated from the Indian subcontinent at its narrowest point by 22 miles of sea called Palk Strait. America has for sometime desired to control the Palk Straits and to make it part of Pentagon's military foot print. This will spur America to dominate the Indian Ocean and cut off vital oil supplies from the Middle East and Africa to China, as well as to thwart China's naval expansion westward. Immediately, after September 11 2001 attacks, the then US defence secretary Rumsfeld embarked on initiatives to bolster further the ties between Sri Lanka and the US. The control of Palk Straits would also hurt India's sea supply route to its eastern states and may necessitate traversing around Sri Lanka to reach these states thereby increasing the journey time and making it a very expensive alternative route. A reduction of influence of the Palk Straits would also hurt India's ambitions to become a regional naval power and limit its naval expansion plans eastwards. It is for these very reasons that China established military ties with the Sri Lankan government and supplied it with military equipment. It is also important to note that a decline in Indian influence over the Palk Straits would also affect British interests in the region. For hundreds of years Britain has sought to dominate the Indian Ocean to keep open sea routes located in the region to supply goods to far Eastern markets. American hegemony over the Indian Ocean and the Palk straits would hurt both Britain and Europe. Hence the control of Sri Lanka is of immense importance to the US and will enable it to curb the threat of China and limit British and European influence in South East Asia and the Far East.

3- The roots of the conflict lie in the disenfranchised Tamil population that was brought over by the British from India's Tamil Nadu region to work on the coffee and tea plantations thereby transforming the island into a major tea producer. However, the majority Buddhist Sinhalese

community disliked Britain's preferential treatment of the mainly-Hindu Tamils. The independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 only accentuated the bitterness between the two communities, as successive Sinhalese governments stalled on promises to grant the Tamils who resided in the North of the country greater political rights. Disappointed by these turn of events, Tamils lost faith in their political leaders as well as the Sri Lankan political process that blocked every attempt to accommodate them. During this period a number of militant groups sprung up. The most prominent of them was The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam commonly known as the LTTE or the Tamil Tigers, which was formed in 1976 and headed by its founder, Velupillai Prabhakaran. Its aim was to create an independent Tamil state named Tamil Eelam in the north and the east of the island. It was only in the 1980s that the LTTE grew in popularity, especially after the failed attempt in 1983 of Tamil legislators to push through reforms for their people. However, the LTTE quickly became infiltrated by British, Indian and US agents— leading to infighting and confrontation with other militant groups. In the 1980s Britain pushed India to support both LTTE and the Sri Lankan government in response to the growing American influence in Sri Lanka. Eventually, India under the pretext of preventing Tamils in India joining the Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka to create a separate homeland directly intervened in the conflict, especially when the Indian Congress ruling party realised that the Sri Lankan army was close to wiping out the LTTE. The intervention of India was continued in the form of a political face of it, and in the form of help to the Tigers from behind a curtain, On July 29, 1987, Indian involvement led to a peace accord signed between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi Sri Lankan President Jayewardene. Under this accord, the Sri Lankan Government made a number of concessions to Tamil demands, including devolution of power to the provinces and the establishment of an Indian Peace Keeping Force in return for stopping support to Tamil insurgents.

4- Indian occupation of parts of Sri Lanka backfired and led to a humiliating withdrawal of Indian troops. America exploited the negative sentiments against India to cement its relations with the LTTE as well as the Sri Lankan government. But America gave preference to the latter. Thereafter, America's relations with the Sri Lankan government grew stronger and reached a new level of cooperation in the days after the attacks of September 11 2001. America now gave Sri Lankan government the green light to pursue the fight against LTTE as part of the global war on terrorism. In return America sought to establish strong military and economic ties with Sri Lanka. In June 2002, Washington held discussions Colombo on a far-reaching Access and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that would enable US warships and aircraft to use facilities in Sri Lanka. In July 2002, President Bush met with then-Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremesinghe at the White House and pledged U.S. support for peace and economic development in Sri Lanka. The United States and Sri Lanka signed a new Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in 2002.An immediate casualty of this newfound relationship was Britain which found itself increasingly isolated for two primary reasons. First, the congress party in India had been replaced by the pro-American BJP, which was reluctant to adopt an aggressive policy towards Colombo. Second the Sri Lankan government was now under the influence of America. Thus Britain resorted to supporting the LTTE until its demise this year.

5- However, it was not until the election of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's in November 2005 that America finally got a Sri Lankan government in place that wholeheartedly supported the destruction of LTTE. In fact Rajapaksa's was elected based on his promise to defeat the LTTE. Rajapaksa formed pacts with the hardline Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna party and extremist Buddhist monks. America openly welcomed his re-election."We remain committed to maintaining the historically close ties between our two countries," a press release from the US Department of

State in Washington DC said. Adam Ereli, deputy spokesman for the US Department of State said: "The United States looks forward to working with President Rajapaksa as he confronts many significant and immediate challenges. " America through Rajapaksa and his brother who is Chief of army staff embarked on a campaign to uproot LTTE. Sensing the change in Colombo Britain, India and Europe did their utmost to prevent Rajapaksa's government to wipe out the LTTE.

6- America provided Rajapaksa's military with vital equipment by instructing Pakistan to help Sri Lanka. In March 2006, Sri Lankan authorities had sought Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher System (MBRLS) and other advanced weapons from Pakistan when Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Pakistan. In May 2008 that Sri Lankan Army Chief Lt-Gen Fonseka came to Pakistan and finalised a deal as per which Pakistan sold 22 Al-Khalid tanks to Sri Lanka in a deal worth over US$100 million. General Fonseka also gave a shopping list of weaponry worth about US$65 million to the Pakistani military authorities. On Jan 19, 2009, in a meeting between Pakistani Defence Secretary Lt-Gen (retd) Syed Athar Ali and his visiting Lankan counterpart Gotabhaya Rajapakse in Rawalpindi, the two countries had agreed to enhance cooperation in military training, exercises and intelligence sharing regarding terrorism.

7- As the Sri Lankan army made vital battle field gains against the LTTE, Britain her proxy India and Europe sought reconciliation between Rajapaksa's government and the LTTE. Their aim was to protect LTTE from being destroyed. America would occasionally join Britain and Europe in encouraging Rajapaksa to support a ceasefire and engage in peace talks—but this was only lip service. Hence a familiar pattern emerged—Britain and India would voice concern for Tamil civilians caught up in the conflict and advocate reconciliation. In response Rajapaksa's would reject such overtures. In fact in the latter days of the conflict Britain, Europe and India repeatedly called for a ceasefire and encouraged worldwide demonstrations by mobilising the Tamil diaspora to protest against Rajapaksa government's killing of civilians. The Sri Lankan government ignored such please and through US assistance via Pakistan managed to crush the LTTE—a militant organization that controlled vast swath of land in the north, ran its own police force, boasted of its own navy and air force.

The defeat of the LTTE means that British and Indian influence in the North of the country has been marginalized and now gives America the opportunity to consolidate her stranglehold over Sri Lanka and establish a permanent military presence in the country. It also allows America to control the Palk Straits and wield her naval power in the Indian Ocean to counter the Chinese threat. Furthermore, America can use Sri Lanka to pressurise India –given that the congress party has returned to power for another 5 years—to follow its policies for the region. However, a lot depends on Rajapaksa's ability to repair relations with the Tamils and accommodate their political concerns. America has already voiced support for such an endeavour and has earmarked vital aid via the IMF to Rajapaksa's government to accomplish such a task. A stable Sri Lanka is vital for American interests, and given the history of the region, Britain and her surrogate India will be looking to re-establish themselves in Sri Lanka. The Anglo-American struggle may have subsided for now, but it is certainly not over.

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