The large posters signifying a tale of triumph against seemingly impossible odds can hardly be missed by anyone traveling the length and breadth of Sri Lanka, and that very much includes the battle scared north of the country which has equal reason to rejoice having been liberated from the evil grip of the bloodthirsty Tamil Tigers after three debilitating decades.

Telling in narrative and touching in effect, the posters depict a gleeful Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa giving his somewhat bashful looking younger brother Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa a spontaneous hug gushing with affection and gratitude.

Indeed, the Rajapaksa brothers Mahinda and Gotabaya have every reason to be proclaimed as the heroic poster boys of the momentous victory—an outcome no Sri Lankan at home or abroad (and even the circumspect international community) thought was ever possible—over one of the world’s most feared and brutally clinical terrorist outfits which devised and subsequently exported the barbarous knowledge of suicide vests and truck bombs to its comrades in death in theaters of secessionist war worldwide.

For whilst the President played political hardball and made anyone who was willing to listen realize that the country could never defeat an enemy it wasn’t prepared to fight, his Defense Secretary—with a seriousness of purpose unmatched by any previous incumbent in that key office—mapped out and unwaveringly directed the definitive final chapter of the long running saga.

Under the firm guidance of Defense Secretary Rajapaksa, the Sri Lankan military did what the Tamil Tiger leadership least expected it to do—double its manpower and bring the fight direct to the enemy and inflict decisive psychological wounds. This was all-flanks engaged warfare based on common-sense and strategic insight. It was brilliant as it was simple, making many wonder why it hadn’t been instituted before.

But to cast light on that quandary one needs to rewind recent history. While May 2009 was when the last remnants of the Tamil Tiger fighters, including its megalomaniac leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, were wiped out and the country’s freedom from terrorism declared, one has to go back to a warm night in November 2005 when the path to attaining that freedom was laid.

Late on that day, when the votes in the presidential election were being tallied and then presidential candidate Rajapaksa realized that he was almost home and dry (and on the day of his 60th birthday at that) he asked his brother Gotabaya—then domiciled in the United States and had taken three-months leave from his job in an IT company to travel to his homeland to help with his brother’s campaign—whether he would consider staying put in Sri Lanka and taking up the post of Defense Secretary and helping him end the war. In what turned out to be the perfect birthday gift, Gotabaya agreed.

Sitting behind his desk which is flanked by a tank full of fish swimming lazily and providing the
perfect antidote to the stress-laden demands of his office, the iron-willed but soft-spoken (though he is known to erupt in volcanic rage when encountering mismanagement and incompetence) Defense Secretary Rajapaksa—who rose to the rank of colonel in the Sri Lankan Army before retiring and emigrating to the USA—acknowledges that the chemistry that came about by his appointment was unprecedented, and had a crucial bearing on the final outcome.

He explains: “For the first time ever in the history of Sri Lanka we had the three commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force working with a Defense Secretary who had served alongside them in the battlefield during the early days of the conflict. And crucially, my brother was the President which meant I could cut out the bureaucratic red-tape and, more importantly, disregard the political interference that had previously crippled this office—and invariably the war effort—and go straight to the Commander-in Chief if and when the need arose.”

Needless to say, it was a gilt-edged connection that shaped the conclusive stages of the war—especially when seeking the wherewithal to substantially boost the firepower. But in the final analysis it was Defence Secretary Rajapaksa’s depth of vision and not his scale of influence that mattered.

“What I was able to do, with the help of the commanders, was to professionalize the three services and change the demoralizing culture where promotion was based more on political connections than merit. We instilled in our soldiers the importance of discipline and feelings of pride in wearing the uniform. We also made them understand that the cause they were fighting was a just one. In addition, we paid special attention to their welfare and that of their families. I believe all these aspects played a vital role in helping us gain the upper hand against the enemy,” says the man who narrowly survived an assassination attempt by a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber who targeted his bullet proof vehicle killing several of his bodyguards.

When asked if he felt his work was now done, the Defense Secretary (whose all encompassing brief also includes public security and law and order) notes: “To a certain extent it has. But now we have to put in place a good intelligence network to ensure that the security of our country is never again compromised by internal fighting forces.

“And having been on a war footing for so long, we have to redefine the role of the Armed Forces now that peace has been restored. Also much of the police force will have to be re-trained and re-orientated to the requirements of law and order in a post-war community setting.

“Beyond that, we also have to ensure peace and order in our society by disarming the many factions and individuals who, by nature of the threats they faced from the Tamil Tigers, were allowed to carry arms. We need to impress upon them that the state can now offer them adequate protection.

“There are too many firearms in circulation, and if Sri Lanka is to enjoy the benefits of peace then it’s an issue that has to be addressed with a sense of urgency.”

Fittingly, a microcosm of the peaceful Sri Lanka that Defense Secretary Rajapaksa helped pave
The steely hand behind demise of Tamil Tigers

can now be seen on a daily basis just across the road from his Defense Ministry office where sits one of Colombo’s most important landmarks, the Galle Face Green.

An expansive stretch of green that looks seductively over the Indian Ocean, it has since it was built in 1865 been the place of choice for the capital’s residents from near and far to gather and relax late into the evening. Because of security concerns it has been closed to the public for several years and depicted an empty forlorn picture that was symptomatic of the depressive state of affairs in the country.

But now it is open and buzzing again, with kites manned by young boys soaring and playfully flirting with each other in the evening breeze. While on terra firma bowling arms are exercised and batting stokes executed as makeshift cricket matches are in progress. And all around is a merry scene of families picnicking and lovers promenading.

It’s a joyful tableau neatly encapsulating a remarkable turnaround in Sri Lanka’s fortunes, and something that for sure catches the eye of Defense Secretary Rajapaksa as he drives home from his office each day.

For that, and a lot more besides Sri Lankans owe him an immense debt of gratitude. And President Rajapaksa would do well to ensure his brother Gotabaya stays around for a while yet to help build on the dividends of peace.

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