

## Taming the LTTE: Counterinsurgency Insights from Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

For 26 years Sri Lanka was embroiled in a brutal civil war to control much of its countryside. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), waged an insurgency against the government's forces, the majority Sinhalese Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF). LTTE attacked the SLAF with ferocity and ingenuity unmatched by any other terrorist organization. The LTTE were labeled "among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world" by the FBI; they revolutionized suicide attacks with the invention of the suicide belt, were the first terrorist organization to employ the use of chemical weapons, and the first to employ a cyber-attack against a state. In the early 2000's the LTTE included a navy, air force, suicide wing, and an international funding organization that raised millions for the cause, while controlling almost a quarter of the Sri Lankan countryside. And yet in a little over four years, the LTTE was wiped off the map. This paper examines the conflict, its root causes, and the strategies used in order to garner insights.

## **Taming the LTTE: Counterinsurgency Insights from Sri Lanka**

For 26 years Sri Lanka was embroiled in a brutal civil war to control much of its countryside. The small island nation of Sri Lanka off the coast of India is roughly the size of West Virginia and home to over 22 million people. Ethnically divided, the country is composed of 74% Sinhalese, 13% Sri Lankan Tamil and 7% Moor (Muslim).<sup>1</sup> The terrorist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), waged a guerilla insurgency against the government's forces, the majority Sinhalese Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF). For 18 of these 26 years, LTTE attacked the SLAF with ferocity and ingenuity that was unmatched by any other terrorist organization for its time. The LTTE were labeled "among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world" by the FBI; they revolutionized suicide attacks with the invention of the suicide belt, were the first terrorist organization to employ the use of chemical weapons, were the first to employ a cyber-attack against a state, and assassinated two world leaders.<sup>2</sup> In the early 2000's their force of approximately 20,000 included a navy, air force, suicide wing, and an international funding organization that raised millions for the cause, while controlling almost a quarter of the Sri Lankan countryside.<sup>3</sup> And yet in a little over four years, the LTTE was wiped off the map despite their robust capability. In 2005, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa assumed office and embarked on Eelam War IV to pursue the complete annihilation of the militant separatist movement. Government forces won. This, the first successful counterinsurgency campaign of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, raises many questions. What were the root causes of this conflict? Did the LTTE make any mistakes that made their defeat easier? What were the keys to the Sri Lankan success? What does this mean for counterinsurgency theory?

The counterinsurgency struggle between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE provides an excellent case study for counterinsurgency theorists. Ethnocentric tensions born out of British rule fueled the insurgency from its nascent stages until the LTTE's defeat in May of 2009. Successive strategic missteps by the leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, contributed to their destruction. The GoSL underwent a series of necessary improvements to enable success on the battlefield. And yet the government's win still remains tarnished; the end of Tamil Eelam War IV did not end the controversy over the conduct of the war nor the calls to assuage Tamil grievances. If the LTTE had pursued different strategies following the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) of 2002, they might not have been defeated. The end of Tamil Eelam War IV did not end the controversy over the conduct of the war nor the calls to assuage Tamil grievances. The struggle between the LTTE and the GoSL provides insights for strategists for application during future counterinsurgency conflicts.

### Background

British Colonial Rule established the precursors for a 26 year Sri Lanka insurgency. The empowerment of Tamils influenced by western education helped fuel ethnic tensions on the island. After gaining independence in 1948, the Sinhalese attempted to correct perceived favoritism towards the Tamils by instituting policies that favored the majority Sinhalese population. After years of attempting a political resolution to the tensions, the Tamils began an armed conflict in 1983 to force a more equitable distribution of power, spawning the birth of the LTTE organization. India tried to intervene in 1987, but could not deter the LTTE from its quest to build a Tamil state. Following the withdrawal of Indian forces in 1990, the LTTE renewed its attacks on the GoSL to bring about the just treatment of the Sri Lankan Tamils until a tenuous peace

was struck in 1994. No political resolution emerged after multiple rounds of peace talks, thus the LTTE reengaged the SLAF until both sides became fatigued in 2002. Political events, including the election of President Rajapaksa, and a natural disaster damaged the LTTE from 2002 to 2006. Despite its weakened state, the LTTE again chose to engage the SLAF leading to the military defeat of the Tigers.

British methods to maintain control over the island of Sri Lanka empowered the minority Tamil people. The Dutch ceded control of the island to the British in 1801 after wresting control from the Portuguese. The British encountered a nation divided along cultural lines predominately between the Sinhalese Buddhist and the Hindu Tamils.<sup>4</sup> Yet these two communities had coexisted for nearly two thousand years together as neighbors.<sup>5</sup> Tensions between the two cultures arose after a brief period of resistance during which the British were able to subdue the Sinhalese Kingdom of Kandy in the central highlands and unite the whole of the country under one rule. British reign brought with it English language education, first by missionaries and later by the state. British efforts were embraced by the Northern Tamils and initially rejected by the Sinhalese, leading to a disproportionate number of the schools built in the Tamil north.<sup>6</sup> With education came opportunity and many Tamils easily rose from British errand boys to western-educated lawyers, doctors, and administrators running much of the country.<sup>7</sup> The Tamils thus became disproportionately overrepresented in the universities, industry, and the highest levels of government.<sup>8</sup>

The British ceded control of the island to the democratically representative government of Ceylon in 1948. Upon transition to self-governance, the majority Sinhalese moved to correct imbalances in government and education inciting the civil

divide between Tamils and Sinhalese.<sup>9</sup> Almost immediately the ruling elites decided that English had to be replaced as the official language of the country. Initially, *both* Sinhala and Tamil languages would be the official languages. By the mid-1950's, a growing Sinhala nationalist movement wanted to impose only Sinhala.<sup>10</sup> The Sinhala Only Language Act that became law in 1956 sparked widespread hostility between the Sinhalese and Tamils.<sup>11</sup> Continuing Sinhalese resentment of perceived Tamil advantages produced university admissions processes favoring the Sinhalese with the Standards of Education Act of 1970. Sinhalese Nationalism even drove the government to adopt a new Constitution in 1972 establishing Buddhist primacy in Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup>

These Sinhalese actions led to a civil war requiring international mediation. In response to the Constitution of 1972, the Tamil minority formed the Tamil United Front (TUF) which would develop to become the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).<sup>13</sup> The TULF cited a litany of grievances against the current government and demanded the establishment of an independent Tamil state, to be named Eelam, in the northern and northeastern of Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup> Infighting between moderate and more active members of the TULF youth organization split creating the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) in 1972, which would evolve to become the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976. A charismatic young leader commanded the outfit by the name of Velupillai Prabhakaran.<sup>15</sup>

On July 13, 1983, an LTTE group ambushed an army patrol in the northern province of Jaffna, killing 13 soldiers and triggering the worst Anti-Tamil rioting in Sri Lankan history. Over 2000 Tamils were killed prompting masses to flee the island for India and other nations. Many of the Tamils remaining fled to the northeast of the

country and supported the rebel groups.<sup>16</sup> The LTTE initially had to compete with numerous other militant groups, but by the late 1980s it had ruthlessly consolidated power as the premier Tamil insurgent organization. The LTTE initially overmatched the ill-equipped and undermanned Sri Lankan Army (SLA), because of training assistance and intelligence support from the Indian government.<sup>17</sup> It took four years for the Sri Lankan army to mount an effective campaign against the LTTE, later known as Eelam War I. In the summer of 1987, the SLA marched into the Northern Province with 8000 men and almost succeeded in capturing much of the LTTE Leadership. As the SLA prepared to assault the Tamil stronghold in Jaffna, an outcry of support from the 60 million Tamils from within India forced it to interfere and impose a peace treaty.<sup>18</sup>

India's arbitration attempts led to unlikely consequences, including uniting GoSL and the LTTE to demand India's ultimate withdrawal from the Sri Lankan conflict. India attempted to arbitrate the civil war, but could not prevent the conflict from continuing. The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) arrived in July 1987 in accordance with the Indo-Lanka Accords, signed by India and Sri Lanka but not by the LTTE. The IPKF grew to a force of 80,000 to establish a buffer between the warring parties in the North.<sup>19</sup> Neither the SLA nor the LTTE were keen on Indian involvement. The GoSL felt they had the LTTE on the run and were prepared to make the final assault. The LTTE saw the Indian government as self-serving in calling for the complete disarmament of the LTTE. Prabhakaran stated he would teach the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, a lesson for his interference in the Tamil quest for Eelam.<sup>20</sup> The LTTE began an all-out fight against the IPKF after refusing to turn over their arms. In an odd twist, the GoSL began arming the LTTE in their fight against the IPKF. For three years, the LTTE harassed the

Indian forces, who were well-disciplined and equipped, but ill-manned and poorly trained for a counterinsurgency fight.<sup>21</sup> Finally, after losing approximately 1,200 killed or injured soldiers, the IPKF withdrew in March 1990.<sup>22</sup>

Emboldened by the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces the LTTE renewed their fight for independence with vigor and tenacity until both sides were exhausted. In many areas, the LTTE just occupied the bases and infrastructure the IPKF had vacated thereby creating in effect the nascent beginnings of Tamil Eelam.<sup>23</sup> The Tigers struck with a vengeance to open Eelam War II by killing 600 Sri Lankan police that had surrendered. The LTTE also began to conduct targeted assassinations of those opposed to their cause. In September 1991, a female LTTE suicide bomber killed a former Indian Prime Minister and two months later a suicide bomber killed the Sri Lankan President.<sup>24</sup> This stage of the conflict also saw the emergence of LTTE conventional warfare capability. Over 5,000 LTTE troops unsuccessfully waged a multi-week siege of the SLA base at Elephant Pass in the Northern Province of Jaffna. The main focus of the SLA strategy was holding key military bases to prevent the LTTE from having free passage in the north and east of the country. Battered and battle-weary the Sri Lankan people went to the polls in 1994. The people elected Chandrika Kumaratunga to the Presidency on a platform in which she promised to bring about a negotiated settlement with Prabhakaran and the LTTE.<sup>25</sup>

After multiple rounds of peace talks, the LTTE initiated Eelam War III which produced victories and losses for both sides until exhaustion forced a cease-fire in 2002. The GoSL and LTTE conducted four rounds of talks from 1994 to 1995, but the LTTE wanted too much.<sup>26</sup> The government balked at the demand to dismantle its

military bases in LTTE areas and at allowing free reign to move about the north and east of the country. After growing frustrated with the peace negotiations and the government's unwillingness to meet its demands, the LTTE reignited the conflict by blowing up two Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) gunboats in the eastern harbor of Trincomalee in April 1995. In response to the attacks, the Kumaratunga administration launched the "war for peace," beginning a series of large-scale operations in an attempt to bring the LTTE back to the negotiating table.<sup>27</sup> In Operation Riviresa in October 1995 40,000 Sri Lankan Army marched to Jaffna, the "capital" of Tamil Eelam, and successfully expelled the LTTE. This was a major coup, but following operations proved more difficult. The LTTE shifted to more guerrilla tactics following the loss of their capital and just chose not to fight where disadvantaged. The LTTE was not defeated following the loss of its capital. In a series of conventional counter attacks from 1996 to 2000, the LTTE was successful in overrunning SLA bases in Mullaitivu, Killinochi, and Elephant Pass.<sup>28</sup> These attacks in effect isolated the SLA forces in Jaffna by April of 2000. The only means to resupply the force was by sea and the SLN and the Air Force lacked the ability to exfiltrate over 60,000 military personnel.<sup>29</sup> The LTTE continued to attack SLA forces, but soon all sides became exhausted. The LTTE declared a unilateral cease-fire in December 2000. Parliamentary elections in October 2001 brought new leadership and the promises of a negotiated settlement. The Norwegians acted as mediators and the LTTE and the GoSL signed the Cease Fire Agreement in February 2002.<sup>30</sup>

Numerous events during the interwar period from 2002-2006 helped to diminish the strength of the LTTE, but not prevent their continued resistance. International efforts to abolish terrorist global funding networks re-doubled following the September 11, 2001

attacks and impacted the LTTE funding systems.<sup>31</sup> Infighting amongst the LTTE led to the defection of an Eastern Province Commander Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, also known by his nom de guerre COL Karuna, along with an estimated 3000 LTTE cadres in March 2004.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the tsunami of 2004 further impacted the LTTE's grip on Tamil Eelam. Triggered by a massive earthquake off the coast of Indonesia, the tidal wave killed roughly 30,000 Sri Lankans and an estimated 3,000 LTTE cadres.<sup>33</sup> In November 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa narrowly won election to become the Sri Lankan President.<sup>34</sup> Rajapaksa was determined to realize a lasting peace through a negotiated settlement from a position of military strength. Throughout the interwar period and despite a cease-fire, the LTTE continued its campaign of consolidating power through targeted assassination and intimidation of not only Sri Lankan officials, but also influential Tamil leaders who opposed LTTE. By the end of 2005, the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission had counted over 3000 cease fire violations by the LTTE.<sup>35</sup>

Despite reduced funding and support, the LTTE marched headlong into Eelam War IV with both sides promising a final resolution to the conflict and engaging in excessively brutal tactics without heed of collateral damage. Hostilities resumed between the two parties following the LTTE closing the gates on the Mavil Aru dam in the Eastern Province in July of 2006.<sup>36</sup> By doing so, the LTTE threatened the water supply for 15,000 people and agriculture production in government-controlled areas. Responding to the provocation with the assistance of COL Karuna, the SLA began a widespread offensive to remove the last vestiges of the LTTE in the east. As they did so, the SLA sought to validate training and investments made during the early stages of the war. Highly trained Special Infantry Operations Teams (SIOTs) and Long Range

Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRPs) were used to disrupt LTTE movements and target field commanders.<sup>37</sup> The LTTE responded with a major offensive targeting the Trincomalee Naval Shipyards, attempting to cut the maritime supply lines to the 50,000 SLA forces located in Jaffna. The LTTE was no match for the reinvigorated SLAF and with each defeat, the SLA grew even stronger. By August of 2007, the SLAF had reduced the LTTE resistance in the Eastern Province and handed over operations in the area to the Sri Lankan Police and Civil Defense Forces, allowing the Army to focus on the North.<sup>38</sup>

The SLA had begun their operations aimed at the LTTE's northern center of gravity six months prior, but the added troops and the victory in the east added momentum to their campaign to crush the LTTE once and for all.<sup>39</sup> The LTTE initially proved effective in countering five SLA assaults into the north, but utilizing increased manpower and tactics honed in the east; the SLA began a multipronged attack. Advances by the SLA 53<sup>rd</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Divisions, garrisoned in Jaffna, forced the LTTE to commit their best forces to prevent an immediate attack on the LTTE capital of Kilinochchi and the Wannu region.<sup>40</sup> The recently raised SLA 58<sup>th</sup> Division moved along the western coast from Silavatturai north destroying Sea Tiger Bases and cutting off any remaining resupplies or prospect of escape to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The 57<sup>th</sup> Division assaulted adjacent to the 58<sup>th</sup> and aimed directly at sweeping into Kilinochchi, while the 59<sup>th</sup> moved along the northeastern corridor to attack the LTTE logistical nerve center in Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK).<sup>41</sup> The assault by the 58<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Divisions methodically moved through the northwest and threatened to encircle Kilinochchi, forcing the LTTE to withdraw its remaining forces towards PTK in early January 2009.

Linking up with the 53<sup>rd</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Divisions shortly after the capture of Kilinochchi, the four divisions then began pushing south towards PTK. The SLA then began slowly tightening its control over the last LTTE strongholds in the "Vanni Pocket" around PTK from January to May of 2009.<sup>42</sup>

At this stage of the war, the international community began to raise concerns about civilian casualties. The LTTE began to petition European countries for outside intervention to end the conflict while at the same time using human shields to protect their withdrawal.<sup>43</sup> The SLA established a series of No Fire Zones (NFZs) in response to international pressure, but continued to tighten its search for LTTE leader Prabhakaran and the last remaining fighters. The LTTE had lost its ability to fight as large units but remained a fierce foe forcing the SLAF to fight hard for every piece of land.<sup>44</sup> Much controversy remains over the exact sequence of events that occurred in these final moves of the war. What is known is that both the LTTE and the SLAF made counter accusations of atrocities against each other and over the treatment of the Tamil population. The LTTE allegedly held 300,000 Tamils as hostages and used them as human shields as the SLAF encircled them. The SLA reportedly intentionally shelled NFZs and hospitals in LTTE-controlled areas, in blatant disregard of international law and human rights, as they tightened the noose around the LTTE remnants.<sup>45</sup> A UN investigation found that more than 70,000 civilians were killed in the final stages of the conflict.<sup>46</sup>

On May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 the SLA stormed a mangrove patch on the edge of the Nandikadal lagoon and killed Prabhakaran. Within hours, President Rajapaksa announced the defeat of the LTTE and the end of Eelam War IV.<sup>47</sup>

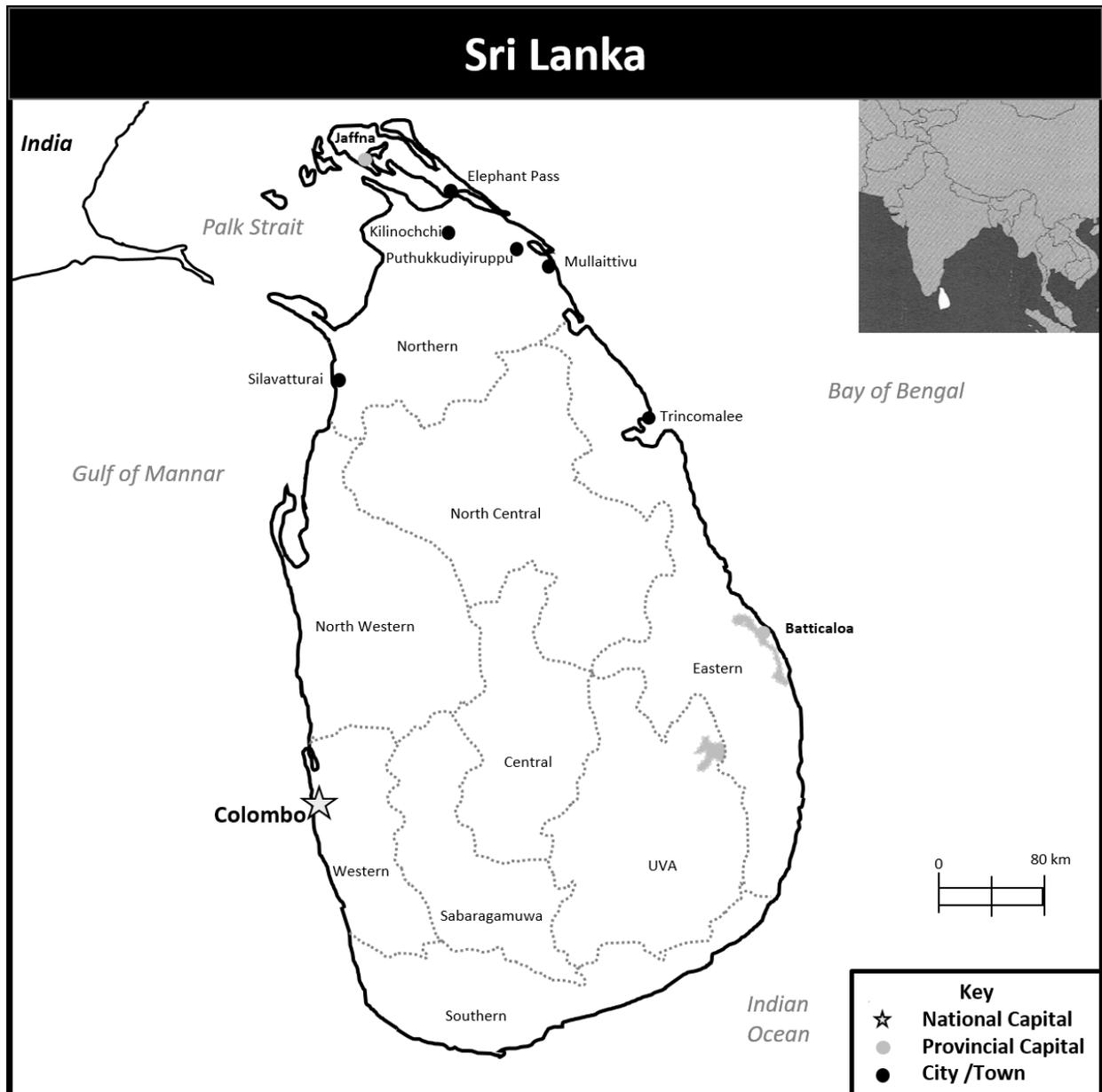


Figure 1. Map of Sri Lanka

### LTTE Failures

Commander Prabhakaran significantly contributed to the demise of the LTTE with successive strategic errors. His heavy-handed tactics to control all aspects of the Tamil liberation movement isolated the LTTE from the people. He further isolated the people from the political process when he forbade Tamils from voting in the 2005

presidential elections; all but guaranteeing a win for Rajapaksa. The decision to attack the IPKF and assassinate the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi allowed the Sri Lankan Government to secure the New Delhi government as a strategic partner. Lastly, in choosing to pursue a military resolution to secure Tamil Eelam and using conventional tactics, Prabhakaran all but ensured defeat for the LTTE.

The harsh tactics used by Prabhakaran to consolidate, maintain, and advance the freedom movement eroded support for the LTTE amongst the Tamil people. As war broke out in Tamil Eelam I, the Tigers were one among numerous other Tamil liberation movements. Prabhakaran and the LTTE killed opposing insurgent leaders; the LTTE became the de facto sole representative of the struggle for Tamil Eelam.<sup>48</sup> The structure of the LTTE evolved into a cult of personality with all wings reporting directly to Prabhakaran and with much of the decision-making centered on him. Prabhakaran spent little time with the political messaging of the LTTE; instead he chose to focus on the military aspects of the conflict. The LTTE information campaign developed into the worship of Prabhakaran and attempted to elevate him to a godlike status.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the conflict, the Tigers assassinated anyone who questioned Prabhakaran and the legitimacy of the movement to include moderate Tamil politicians, Tamil people, and military leaders within the LTTE. Heavy taxes, forced labor, child conscription, and brutal repression in LTTE controlled areas distanced the LTTE from its support base. Towards the end of the conflict, Tamils even began providing information to the Sri Lankan Forces on LTTE activities.<sup>50</sup>

At the direction of Prabhakaran, the Tamil people boycotted the 2005 election allowing Rajapaksa to rise to power, vowing to end the conflict. The elections pitted

Rajapaksa against the United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. Wickremesinghe ran on a platform to continue negotiations with the LTTE seeking to end the conflict once and for all. The UNP had historically relied upon the nation's minority populations to achieve victory. Credible reports indicate that a deal between Rajapaksa and Prabhakaran encouraging the boycott may have been struck for either a handover of COL Karuna to the LTTE or to provide an opportunity for the LTTE to renew hostilities with the GoSL.<sup>51</sup> In what would turn out to be a close election, Prabhakaran's decision to forbid Tamils in LTTE-controlled areas to vote helped turn the tide in Rajapaksa's favor.<sup>52</sup> Rajapaksa immediately set out to fulfill his election promises, selecting his brother as Minister of Defense, instituting a study of the past LTTE wars, and establishing the "Rajapaksa Model" for counterinsurgency. This approach emphasized doing whatever was necessary to bring about the military destruction of the LTTE to include regulating the media, allowing complete operational authority to the military and working with strategic partners.<sup>53</sup> Allowing Rajapaksa to come to power proved to have dire consequences for Prabhakaran and the LTTE.

Prabhakaran's tactical decisions to attack India further isolated the LTTE and allowed the Sri Lankan Government to secure a critical strategic partner. The Indian state of Tamil Nadu lies just across the Palk Strait and is home to 65 million Tamil people.<sup>54</sup> This area was a significant support base for the LTTE and in the early 1980's liberation fighters received training and equipment from the Indian Intelligence Agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Prabhakaran was furious when the Indians interceded in the conflict as he felt they were subjugating his quest for independence to the political motivations of the Indian Government.<sup>55</sup> He vowed to continue his fight and

punish those responsible. The expulsion of the IPKF in 1980 and the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister the year following ensured little political or military support from New Delhi.<sup>56</sup> The Rajapaksa government was able to exploit this rift and set up high-level communications with the Indian Government providing critical support to the Sri Lankan Government.<sup>57</sup>

Prabhakaran's failure to consolidate political gains before shifting prematurely to conventional military operations during Eelam War IV doomed the LTTE.<sup>58</sup> Prabhakaran had attained recognition for the LTTE as the ruling authority over much of the northern areas of Sri Lanka following the CFA in August of 2002. The LTTE had established constabulary functions and prided itself on the prompt and efficient execution of justice.<sup>59</sup> Despite these significant gains, Prabhakaran wanted more, and chose to incite the fourth and final round of the conflict.<sup>60</sup> Not desiring to cede any of his recent gains to the SLA with guerilla tactics, Prabhakaran chose instead to engage conventionally. Even when asked by some of his military commanders to return to hit-and-run tactics he did not relent.<sup>61</sup> By choosing to fight this way, the LTTE was outgunned, outmaneuvered, and ultimately defeated by a force much more adept at conventional warfare. Although the Sri Lankan Armed Forces of 2000 were ill prepared to undertake Eelam War IV, they were able to learn and adapt their strategy to ultimately win the war, assisted by the LTTE moving away from their guerrilla tactics that had been so successful.

#### GoSL Successes

The Sri Lankan Government adapted their strategy in the post 9/11 world to increase their chances of success against the LTTE. The Government of Sri Lanka used strategic communications and diplomacy to align global powers against the LTTE,

boost its military capability, and negate international criticisms. Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda in 2005 began a series of improvements to the SLN which resulted in the isolation of the LTTE from the sea. The GoSL exploited divisions amongst the LTTE and was able to secure the cooperation of the defector COL Karuna, thus weakening the LTTE's grip on the eastern province. The SLAF went through a period of massive growth and training leading up to and throughout Eelam War IV. Finally, the SLAF began to cooperate between their services creating improved joint effects on the battlefield.

The GoSL effectively leveraged diplomacy with global powers to isolate the LTTE, achieve military superiority, and negate international condemnation of the conflict. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the international community became increasingly critical of violent separatist movements employing terrorist tactics.<sup>62</sup> The US had previously designated the LTTE a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997, but other nations began to follow suit motivated by skillful diplomacy on the part of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.<sup>63</sup> Britain banned the LTTE in 2001. The EU instituted a travel ban on LTTE representatives in 2005, followed by Canada outlawing LTTE funding networks later the same year.<sup>64</sup> After the LTTE assassinated Kadirgamar in 2005, the EU banned all remittances and funding networks of the organization within its 22 nation delegation.<sup>65</sup> The GoSL effectively capitalized on the rift between the Indian government and the LTTE securing political, economic, and intelligence support for operations against the Tigers.<sup>66</sup> The GoSL was able to work with the US to secure military education, equipment, and intelligence sharing.<sup>67</sup> President Rajapaksa secured over 6 billion USD

in military and financial aid from China in exchange for the rights to develop a deep sea port in Sri Lanka. With the Chinese agreement, Sri Lanka also found a strategic partner that could prevent the UN Security Council from interfering with the destruction of the LTTE. The Rajapaksa government proficiently used diplomacy to isolate the LTTE internationally and strengthen their own military capability.<sup>68</sup>

SLN maritime interdiction operations reduced external support to and the efficacy of the LTTE. Prabhakaran understood the importance of the maritime domain soon after founding the LTTE. He formally established the Sea Tigers, the naval wing of the LTTE, in 1984, enhancing the capability to smuggle men, arms, and equipment across the Palk Strait to and from Tamil Nadu. In response, the SLN attempted to halt the cross-channel traffic using Israeli-built Dvora Fast Attack Craft (FAC); then the Sea Tigers upgraded from small boats to high horsepower suicide boats and swarm tactics.<sup>69</sup> Building on the initial success of the Sea Tigers and needing new sources of revenue and supplies, the LTTE expanded their fleet to include over 20 trawlers, over 25 ocean going cargo ships, six submarines, and numerous other small craft.<sup>70</sup> Using their ocean-going capability, the Tigers were able to develop an extensive smuggling network transporting arms and drugs to fuel the conflict. Profits from smuggling, taxes, and fundraising activities from the Tamil diaspora, according to Sri Lankan intelligence estimates, reached \$50-75 million annually from 1993-2002, increasing to \$200-300 million per year until 2008.<sup>71</sup>

Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda was appointed to command the SLN in 2005 and was determined to defeat the LTTE maritime capability.<sup>72</sup> The SLN took a two-pronged approach to defeat the Sea Tigers; first attacking the smuggling network and

then defeating the LTTE small boats. The SLN experienced modest success initially in defeating the LTTE mid-range trawlers, but these efforts failed to stem the flow of arms and support in 2005. The SLN shifted tactics in 2006 to focus on the ocean-going cargo ships.<sup>73</sup> Using a fleet of Offshore Patrol Boats (OPBs) purchased from India, the US, and Israel along with intelligence support from the US and India the SLN was able to destroy the Tigers ocean-going fleet, with the last demolished in 2008 1,890 nm off the coast of Sri Lanka.<sup>74</sup> To defeat the LTTE's suicide and swarm tactics Vice Admiral Karannagoda developed the Small Boat Concept, essentially taking the Sea Tigers tactics and turning them back on to themselves.<sup>75</sup> Rapid Action Boat Squadrons (RABS) were developed with 25 to 30 indigenously constructed 14- and 17-meter long, high-powered, and heavily armed inshore patrol craft. RABS were then stationed in high threat locations and equipped with improved maritime surveillance and communications systems provided by the US. These advances enabled the SLN to interdict and destroy the Sea Tigers swarms. These capabilities, incorporated with the OPBs and Dorva FACs, established a layered defense around Sri Lanka, eliminating the threat the Sea Tigers once posed and a significant source of the organization's funding.<sup>76</sup>

The GoSL capitalized on internal LTTE dissension and brokered a peace deal with COL Karuna in March of 2004, reducing the LTTE's grip in the east. COL Karuna had been an LTTE senior commander since 1984.<sup>77</sup> Though originating from the east, he had supported northern LTTE counter-offensive operations on numerous occasions.<sup>78</sup> High casualty rates incurred during these counter-offenses, high taxes on eastern Tamils, and perceived political favoritism for Northern LTTE commanders prompted Karuna to revolt along with forces loyal to him. Prabhakaran viewed the

rebellion as de-legitimizing his role as the undisputed leader of the LTTE and diminishing the LTTE's bargaining power with the GoSL, so he launched an offense to crush Karuna and his supporters. With the support of the GoSL, Karuna, along with many of his troops began a low-level war against the LTTE.<sup>79</sup> Within months, LTTE personnel in the eastern province were being picked off through ambushes and assassinations. Later, Karuna would form the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TVMP), reconciling with the GoSL and being placed in charge of the Eastern Province.<sup>80</sup> Karuna's partnership with the GoSL provided the government with a wealth of intelligence on the LTTE's formations, training, and fortifications as well as information on its internal and international operations. Lastly, the Tamil people were able to see in Karuna and his defection that there was a different way for Tamils to attain freedom that did not run through the LTTE and Prabhakaran.<sup>81</sup>

The SLAF went through a period of massive growth and training leading up to and throughout Eelam IV. Shortly after Rajapaksa assumed the presidency in 2005, he initiated a detailed review of past campaigns against the LTTE. Two significant shortfalls became readily apparent based on the analysis; one, the SLAF lacked the necessary force structure to hold terrain that they had fought so hard to gain; second, limited manpower restricted the SLAF from opening a multi-front campaign against the LTTE.<sup>82</sup> Based on the outcome of these studies Rajapaksa approved the rapid expansion of the armed forces and began growing the Army by 5,000 new recruits each month.<sup>83</sup> The appointment of General Fonseka by Rajapaksa to command the SLA brought with it a renewed focus on training. Expanding upon the Special Infantry Operations Team (SIOT) concept, which he had developed in 2002, Fonseka made it standard across the

army. SIOTs consisted of eight-man elements that had completed a 22-week selection and training regimen that focused on jungle warfare, explosives, medical and communications training. SIOTs were then attached six to a rifle company where in addition to their other duties they served as instructors to raise the overall level of readiness and impart SIOT skills to the rest of the company.<sup>84</sup> This massive expansion and improved training and readiness enabled the SLAF to pursue the LTTE relentlessly on multiple fronts and were a significant factor in the SLAF success during Eelam War IV.<sup>85</sup>

Concurrently the SLAF expanded its capability to integrate fully maritime and air operations to create joint effects on the battlefield. While the services conducted separate operations during Eelam War IV, cooperation among the services and the police enabled success.<sup>86</sup> Sri Lankan Air Forces (SL-AF) extensively employed Close Air Support (CAS) to assist ground and maritime operations. The SL-AF employed Israeli-built Kfir ground attack fighters, MIG-29 fighters, and MI-24 "Hind" gunships to soften LTTE defenses and demoralize the enemy while supporting the SLA.<sup>87</sup> The Hinds assisted the SLN with the destruction of the Sea Tigers. SL-AF mobility platforms ferried troops and cargo throughout the area of operations as well as conducted medical evacuations of the wounded. The SLN's aforementioned layered defenses complimented SLA activities in the northern provinces and prevented LTTE forces from escaping by sea. The SLN acquired a converted cruise ship dubbed the "Jetliner" to conduct resupply missions to the SLA forces stationed in Jaffna and participated in ground operations to free up manpower.<sup>88</sup> The synergies achieved through cooperation

amongst the SLA, SLN, and SL-AF served as a force multiplier and a critical component in the destruction of the LTTE.

### What Could the LTTE Have Done Differently

Given the state of affairs in Sri Lanka post 9/11, the LTTE could have chosen other strategies to prevent their defeat. First, the LTTE could have opted to abandon terrorist tactics and pursue primarily political actions to realize Tamil Eelam given the CFA and the new global environment post 9/11. Once enjoined in battle, the LTTE fought conventionally, instead the LTTE should have fought using guerrilla tactics. Ultimately, different strategy options proved too difficult for Prabhakaran to understand.

The LTTE could have renounced terrorism and consolidated their territorial gains to focus on a political means for the realization of Tamil Eelam. Following the CFA of 2002, Prabhakaran had the opportunity to establish Eelam politically. The LTTE could have settled for the territory it possessed and pursued political recognition through the CFA. The LTTE could have continued to expand its historical claims through democratic determination once it had been recognized domestically and internationally, as the CFA intended. To complete this undertaking, the LTTE would have had to be willing to give up much of their military capability as a bargaining instrument and to reject terror as a tool. By agreeing to wed their cause to the outcome of the CFA deliberations, Prabhakaran would have committed the Norwegians to the defense of the Tamil people and Tamil Eelam. In the end, Prabhakaran instead chose to pursue a purely military solution.

Once engaged in hostilities the LTTE could have decided to fight more asymmetrical vice playing to SLAF strengths. Given the increased manpower and training of the SLAF, the only alternative for the LTTE once engaged in combat was to

abandon their fixed structures and large conventional weapons and fight like a guerilla. Choosing to fight on the SLAFs terms negated any strengths the LTTE possessed. Caching their arms and resorting to hit and run tactics would have allowed the LTTE to lengthen the conflict and to attack the will of the Rajapaksa government without giving the GoSL the satisfaction of triumphant victories for each town or village seized. In the end, the previously adaptable Prabhakaran proved unwilling to revert back to guerrilla warfare. He was incapable of abandoning Eelam, even temporarily, and in doing so, he sealed his fate and the fate of the LTTE.

### Post War

The cessation of hostilities did not end the controversy surrounding the conduct of the war, nor did it end the call to recognize Tamil grievances. Rajapaksa maintained Sri Lanka on a war footing in the months following the conclusion of hostilities. Much of the north of the country remained under tight military control.<sup>89</sup> Many of the 300,000 people who came out of LTTE-controlled areas were held in detention camps for extended periods of time.<sup>90</sup> Rajapaksa chose to consolidate his power and control dissent inside the country instead of moving to address the grievances of the Tamil population. The UN began initial investigations into possible human rights violations during the final months of Eelam War IV amid increasing international criticism of the GoSL. The GoSL's ruthless control of the media, which helped ensure popular support for the war, continued alongside an edict to stomp out critics of the regime.<sup>91</sup> Rajapaksa held elections two years early to capitalize on his popular support following the war and won in January 2010. In the months following, the Rajapaksa coalition employed bribes and plush appointments to guarantee a majority of seats in parliamentary elections.<sup>92</sup> He dismissed judges that dared question the regime, packed loyalists into positions of

power and eradicated term limits on the presidency, all but ensuring a dynastic rule for the him and his allies. For four years Sri Lanka continued to slide deeper and deeper into what most thought was an authoritarian state.<sup>93</sup> Then in elections in 2015, in what was thought to be an impossible outcome, Maithripala Sirisena, the former Minister of Health and a defector from the president's party, won. Sirisena narrowly defeated Rajapaksa using a broad-based coalition that spanned ethnic and ideological lines. The Sirisena government began rolling back many of the presidential powers and nepotism that was central to the past regime.<sup>94</sup> Coinciding with this, the UNHCR released its long-awaited report on Human Rights violation allegations against the LTTE and the GoSL in September of 2015.<sup>95</sup> The report stated that there are reasonable grounds to conclude that each side committed human rights abuses to include the LTTE using civilians as human shields and conducting assassinations of both Tamil and Sinhalese civilians whom opposed Prabhakaran.<sup>96</sup> Further, it found that the SLAF illegally detained almost 300,000 Tamils and illegally targeted NFZs and hospitals among a host of other egregious acts.<sup>97</sup> President Sirisena's legitimacy was further strengthened after his United National Front for Good Governance party won the largest number of seats in parliamentary elections in August of 2015.<sup>98</sup> Sirisena addressed the Sri Lankan Parliament in January 2016 stating that he was beginning the process of rewriting the Sri Lankan constitution. His intent is to distribute more political power to the local level. While still facing opposition this devolution from Sinhalese Nationalists, these actions, if enacted, could adequately address many of the grievances of the Tamils and could avoid another conflict.<sup>99</sup>

## Insights

Examining the Sri Lankan counterinsurgency fight provides many insights for counterinsurgency theorists. The structures of terrorist organizations and the manner in which they make decisions are important to understand in counterinsurgency operations. Isolating guerillas from support and safe havens limits their ability to sustain the conflict. Overwhelming force ratios on the part of the SLAF enabled the military defeat of the LTTE. Yet the excessive force employed by the SLAF was unneeded and counterproductive to GoSL goals. Finally, the population's will and support matters when waging a counterinsurgency war – for both sides.

Organizational structures and the personalities of leaders should be analyzed when undertaking counterinsurgency operations. In the case of the LTTE, the organization was a creation of Prabhakaran's. All organizational decision-making was centralized around him. Once known for being a dynamic trend-setting terrorist leader, Prabhakaran's successive strategic errors doomed the LTTE.<sup>100</sup> Political maneuvers by the GoSL were able to exploit rifts in the LTTE, turning COL Karuna against the Tigers, and in doing so substantially reduce the LTTE's hold on the Eastern Province.<sup>101</sup>

Isolating insurgencies from safe havens and support zones constricts their ability to sustain conflict. Maritime interdiction operations isolated the Tigers geographically, eliminating their smuggling operations and significantly impacting their fundraising activities.<sup>102</sup> The GoSL was able to isolate the LTTE successfully from international support with adept diplomacy. Indeed, the LTTE's actions even distanced the movement from the Tamil population reducing a critical support base for the insurgency.<sup>103</sup> As Niel Smith commentated in his Joint Forces article on the defeat of the

LTTE, by 2009 it was "...a shadow of its former self, bankrupt, isolated, illegitimate, and divided..."<sup>104</sup>

Overwhelming force ratios enabled the SLAF to pursue a military defeat of the LTTE. Exact force numbers for this case study have proved elusive for both the SLAF and the LTTE. Manpower approximations for the Sri Lankan defense organizations to include police forces and civil defense forces range from approximately 433,500 to 450,000 personnel depending on the sources.<sup>105</sup> Ascertaining the size of the LTTE is even harder with numbers ranging from 10,000 – 30,000 cadres.<sup>106</sup> Using these estimates the number of GoSL forces to LTTE is a range from 14:1 – 45:1. By comparison, the total security troops in Iraq in March of 2007, according to the Brookings Institute, was 155,205 coalition troops plus 439,678 Iraq security forces, against an estimated 70,000 insurgents.<sup>107</sup> Force ratios in comparison would be 8:1. Using the Sri Lankan ratios, the coalition would have needed security forces numbering between 1,000,000 to 3,150,000 troops.

The excessive use of force in the waning days of the war was unneeded and counterproductive to the GoSL cause. The LTTE was isolated internationally and geographically, divided, and separated from its population base. Prabhakaran's desire to hold territory at all cost doomed the LTTE. On top of it all, they were significantly outnumbered by the GoSL security forces. In a conventional fight, the LTTE had little chance of escaping a military defeat.

The Rajapaksa government held over 300,000 Tamils in internment camps. The UN estimates 40,000-70,000 civilians were killed in the crossfire from January to May of 2009. Those deaths could have been prevented; instead of shelling the NFZs, the SLAF

could have chosen to rescue LTTE-held civilian captives. The captives could have been detained in the detention camps. The detainment of the individuals would have come at the cost of increased casualties or a lengthened siege, but would have preserved the professional reputation of the GoSL and possibly helped avoid international condemnation. Allegations of rape, abductions, intentional shelling of NFZs and war crimes only served to solidify UNHCR, US, British, and international calls for investigation, reconciliation, and accountability. The fervor created by these actions only served to highlight the plight of the Tamil people and feed the eventual downfall of the Rajapaksa regime, and in the end might give the Tamils some concessions.

Populations' hearts and minds still matter in counterinsurgency operations. In a conflict where both sides ignored the population, their importance may seem counterintuitive. In ignoring them, however, each side doomed their cause. If Prabhakaran had adhered to Mao's three dictums of the unity of the insurgency, unity amongst the people and the insurgency, and the destructions of the unity of the enemy, he could have grown the LTTE numbers to incorporate a larger portion of the 2 million ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka.<sup>108</sup> Adhering to Mao may not have saved Prabhakaran, but it would have presented a more formidable challenge to the SLAF and also strengthened the LTTE cause. For the Rajapaksa Government, employing excessive force and ignoring the plight of the Tamil people opened his government to international scrutiny. Following a period of elation, the regime was ousted and replaced by a government that appears to be moving towards addressing the grievances of the Tamil populace and pursuing devolution.

## Conclusion

The 26-year conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE provides an excellent case study for counterinsurgency theorists. Ethnocentric tensions born out of British rule fueled the insurgency from its nascent stages until the LTTE's defeat in May of 2009. Prabhakaran made successive strategic errors in isolating the LTTE from the people and from India, allowing Rajapaksa to come to power, and being inflexible in his military operations. The Government of Sri Lanka learned and adapted to enable success on the battlefield. Following the CFA of 2002 the LTTE had options, which if taken may have prevented its defeat. Following the war, the international community continued to demand reconciliation and accountability for the brutality of the conflict. Insights about the organizational structures of insurgencies, the effectiveness of isolation, overwhelming force ratios, the excessive use of force, and the population-centric nature of counterinsurgency are worth pondering for those who would undertake such operations in the future.

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