

Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won

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Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won

Introduction

Four watershed events spurred the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka – the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956, the Republican Constitution of 1972, the Parliamentary elections of 1977 and the 1983 ethnic riots.¹ The killing of 13 Sri Lankan Army (SLA) soldiers by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on 23 July 1983 marked the initiation of armed hostilities and the beginning of Eelam War I, which ended in 1987. India intervened to end the war in which the SLA had the upper hand.

The LTTE's brush with the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) from October 1987 to March 1990 ended inconsequentially. Eelam War II began in July 1990 and closed in a ceasefire in January 1995. The next round of fighting (Eelam War III) began in April 1995, and culminated in the February 2002 ceasefire, the longest in the conflict. It was officially revoked by the Sri Lankan Government (SLG) only in January 2008, though for all practical purposes, it had been broken in 2006. The decisive Eelam War IV started at Mavil Aru in July 2006 and flared up into an all-out offensive. The security forces scored a historic victory on 18 May 2009, when the Tigers capitulated near their stronghold of Mullaithivu.

The centrepiece of previous government strategies was to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table. Ceasefires were accompanied by five direct and two back-channel negotiations with the LTTE. The first of five attempts was the failed Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, which was followed by efforts towards power-sharing, made by Presidents R Premadasa and Chandrika Kumaratunga, Prime Minister Ranil Wickeremesinghe and President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The LTTE was offered the best chances for devolution by Wickeremesinghe, when both sides agreed to explore a federal solution in December 2002, but the Tigers reneged on this proposal.

Rajapaksa explored outcomes from two rounds of proforma talks at Geneva and Oslo in 2005-06 but became convinced that the LTTE, under

its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, would never be amenable to a negotiated settlement, as he was determined to win Eelam through military means.² Yet, Rajapaksa wanted to make one last attempt at the resolution of the conflict through dialogue. Eric Solheim, a special advisor to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sri Lanka, who was the key architect of the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) and negotiations, attempted to arrange a meeting of the SLG with Prabhakaran. However, it did not materialise.³

When the door to negotiation had been firmly shut by Prabhakaran and the average military losses had climbed up to 90 deaths per month in 2006, Rajapaksa chose to retaliate with military action, stating, “(Mavil Aru) gave me the green light.”⁴ In his Hero’s Day speech on 27 November 2006, Prabhakaran challenged Rajapaksa to take on the Tigers. He warned that unless there was a constitutional package for the Tamils within one year, Rajapaksa would have to bear the consequences.⁵

To be fair to the LTTE, no SLG had ever offered any constitutional package. On the other hand, it was the LTTE which had presented its version of devolution, in the document titled “Interim Self-Governing Authority” (ISGA) to the Wickremesinghe government in 2003. But before the government could respond to the proposal, it was dismissed by President Kumaratunga. Later, Kumaratunga herself tried to reinstate work on the proposal but insisted that the LTTE disclose the outline of the final solution which would be acceptable to them. The LTTE never did, and the ISGA chapter was closed.⁶

As enunciated in his election manifesto - *Mahinda Chinthana* - Rajapaksa was determined to eliminate terrorism. “Prepare for war, even as you negotiate peace” was his maxim. In November 2005, soon after he became President, he cranked up the war machinery. The counter-insurgency campaign which lasted 33 months rendered the most unexpected result, when the SLG demonstrated that not only could a guerilla force be vanquished, it could also be comprehensively routed.

Despite incurring enormous social, human and diplomatic costs, the root of the problem has not been addressed. For Rajapaksa, winning the war was easier than winning the peace.

The Fourth Round of War

In his inaugural speech as President of Sri Lanka, Rajapaksa invited Prabhakaran for talks. The latter's response came at the annual Hero's Day (Maaveerar Naal) speech, when he stated that his organisation would "wait and observe" the new President's approach to the peace process.⁷ The LTTE had decided to raise the stakes by targeting the military at random. The ambush of 13 unarmed soldiers on 5 December 2005 was a serious breach of the CFA. In the next six to eight months, the LTTE would taunt and test the SLA and the resolve of the government repeatedly.

In April 2006, a daring suicide attack outside the fortified Army Headquarters seriously wounded the Army Commander Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka, who remained *hors de combat* for more than six months. The blockade of a water source in Mavil Aru in the east in July 2006 was the bait for a direct confrontation. Pitched battles were fought to lift the siege of the water channel. The fight was facilitated for the SLA by the landmark split in the LTTE in April 2004, when Col Karuna, the commander in the east, broke away from the movement, along with 6,000 fighters. Mavil Aru turned out to be one more strategic blunder by Prabhakaran, giving the Rajapaksa regime the legitimacy to revoke the ceasefire and start the war. The Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, instituted to support the Norway-brokered peace process, concluded that the LTTE was to blame for the fracture of the CFA.⁸

Eelam War IV was launched in three stages: Mavil Aru to liberation of the east; capture of Kilinochchi; and cornering and crushing the LTTE around Mullaithivu. The war was triggered by the LTTE and spread like wildfire from Mavil Aru towards the east and then the south, across the Verugal River into Batticaloa District. This became known as the eastern offensive, which ended in the capture of Thoppigala, the LTTE's biggest operational base in the east, on 19 July 2007.

Under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord (ISLA), the north and east were merged as the Northeast Province, to form the geographical bases of a Tamil homeland. In 2006, the Supreme Court held the merger invalid, separated the two provinces and struck a major blow to the concept of a historic habitation for the Tamils. In sync with this judgment, military operations were stepped up to cleanse the east of the LTTE to make the de-merger a reality on the ground.

Liberation of the East

The eastern offensive began on 26 July 2006, with the lifting of the siege of Mavil Aru, where one battalion of 22 Infantry Division was employed. Operations were fought in three phases:

- Phase 1: Mavil Aru-Kaddaparinchan-Muttur.
- Phase 2: Sampur-Verugal-Vakkarai.
- Phase 3: Batticaloa-Unnuchchi-Thoppigala.

The troops employed were from 22 and 23 Infantry Divisions, Commando and Special Forces Brigades and the Special Task Force (STF). At the time of the offensive, 53 Infantry Division, the only offensive division, was employed to contain the LTTE in the north. Close air support was provided by Kfir fighters and Mi24 helicopters, and reconnaissance and surveillance by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and Beechcraft aircraft. Operations were led by Maj Gen Nissanka Wijesinghe under the overall command of Maj Gen Nanda Malawarachchi. The overall Commander, from Phase 2 onwards, was Maj Gen Parakrama Pannipittiya, who was unceremoniously removed from command after the operations, on charges of corruption.

The LTTE had always coveted the high-value Trincomalee Harbour defended by a brigade of the SLA and Eastern Naval Command. During periods of ceasefire, the LTTE invariably improved its defences around Sampur on the southern edge to the entrance of the harbour. While the LTTE had insisted that Sampur was a pre-ceasefire territorial gain of 1997, the SLA claimed it was an encroachment and a breach of the CFA.

By setting the trap at Mavil Aru, the Tigers' aim was to draw the SLA from Muttur, on the edge of the southern harbour line, in order to expand the Sampur defences further east and dominate the movement of shipping in the harbour (by observation and fire). The battle for Mavil Aru-Muttur – "Operation Watershed" – was a close one, with the LTTE nearly pulling off a victory. In the confused battle that ensued, the SLA not only held on to Muttur but also took the fight to Sampur to evict the Tigers from the strategic perch overlooking the harbour.

The battle of Muttur was fought bravely by the naval detachment defending Muttur jetty and keeping it open for boat movements. The sailors established a beachhead, enabling 200 police personnel from Muttur to counter-attack

the LTTE lodgments in Muttur. The 300-strong Navy Harbour Defence unit ferried reinforcements and replenishments in fibreglass boats under LTTE fire. Ten Fast Attack Craft (FAC) were deployed along the beachfront of Muttur, Foul Point and east of it, denying the LTTE any sea movement. Naval Special Forces prepared and secured the beachhead east of Muttur prior to SLA landings, with naval guns in support.⁹

Sampur was a big Tiger base, supported by mortars and guns, which had to be withdrawn after the base was overwhelmed. Sampur was a major victory for the SLA and the beginning of the rout of the Tigers in the east. By turning the flank, the SLA was able to advance southwards towards Toppur, with the relative safety of a protected eastern flank resting on the seaboard. Naval gunfire support, in addition to air and artillery, was employed to neutralise LTTE launch pads south of Foul Point. Five fast gunboats and four FAC engaged Sea Tigers' boats ferrying LTTE reinforcements from Batticaloa to Vakkarai. After Toppur, the next pitched battle was Ichchilampattai. The LTTE had not only prepared defences but were also allegedly using civilians from Muttur-Sampur as human shields.

The Verugal River divides Trincomalee and Batticaloa Districts and the only bridge on the disused A-15 road connecting the two townships was blown up by the Tigers, while withdrawing to Kathiraveli-Vakkarai. Besides cleaning up Sampur and the south, SLA opened up the A-15 road, especially north of Elephant Point, which had been the LTTE stronghold. The A-11 road from Polonnaruwa to Batticaloa, adjacent to the railway line, meets the A-15 near Elephant Point and was held and patrolled by the SLA — unlike the A-15, which was not dominated.

In the Batticaloa District, the LTTE had three major bases in the interior and several smaller launch pads closer to the coast. Astride Verugal, deep in the forest and inaccessible, was Tirikonamadu; across Batticaloa, sticking out of the plains, was Baron's Cap or Thoppigala and near the south (near Amparai), covered in a thick canopy of trees, was Kangikadichi Aru. The LTTE used these bases as training facilities and transit points for movements between the north and east. The terrain in the east is comparatively easier and more populated than in the north.

Thoppigala is a large tract of rocky jungle terrain and was one of the biggest bases of the LTTE in the eastern province. The LTTE did not give a

major fight but chose to withdraw, leaving behind valuable fixed and movable military the assets. SLA took weeks to clear the base, though victory in the east was proclaimed on 19 July 2007, nearly one year after Mavil Aru.

The eastern offensive was deliberate and well-planned, designed to test the LTTE and create a favourable climate for the northern offensive. The loss of the east meant a loss of manpower for LTTE, which it had begun to feel soon after Karuna's defection. Military success in the east was made easy due to Karuna's sterling assistance. He was the LTTE's finest field commander in charge of the east and an asset for the SLA, though it denied any military collaboration with him. But he had valuable information of LTTE locations, resources and hideouts. The Karuna group is believed to have fought alongside the SLA in Vakkarai, but officially, this collaboration is denied.

The cost of victory in the east was upwards of 5,000 lives lost, charges of severe human rights abuse, nearly 400,000 persons internally displaced and hundreds missing. After Muttur and Sampur were declared High Security Zones (HSZs), the (majority) Tamil residents were resettled elsewhere. A similar displacement of population had taken place in Jaffna, when the Palaly airbase and surrounding areas were declared HSZs in the mid-1990s.

Grand victory celebrations followed in Colombo's Independence Square where President Rajapaksa was presented with a scroll of honour and a 21-gun salute by the victorious Service Chiefs. Descriptions of the event were profuse – from "The Rising of the East" to a "New Dawn in the East", a reference to the seizing of the LTTE's bastion after 14 years.

The Thoppigala celebrations were meant to give the President political traction. His celebration speech aimed at the Tamils glorified the actions of the armed forces in liberating the east from terrorism. Yet, dark clouds of scepticism remained even within the government. Rauf Hakeem, one of Rajapaksa's ministers at that time, described the event as a political exercise built on military gains that made the Tamils feel like a conquered people.¹⁰

Through its alliance with the Karuna group, the government was not only able to subdue the eastern province, but also ride to power through local and provincial elections in 2008. Karuna joined the Cabinet as Minister for National Integration.

Following the eastern victory, there were three scenarios on the table: political and military consolidation of the east with preparations for operations

in the north; launching the northern offensive after LTTE's rejection of a political package; and restoration of ceasefire, revival of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and return to negotiations. Predictably, the option to take the war to the north was chosen. The idea of political devolution was far-fetched as it was never seriously on the government's table.

The Northern Offensive

A Security Forces Headquarters (Wanni) was established under Maj Gen Jagath Jayasooriya (later Lt Gen and Army Commander) which played a vital role in coordinating the operations of offensive formations and securing rear areas. It was the SLA's biggest and strategically most important regional command, covering an area of 25,000 sq km, stretching from Pooneryn in the west to Weli Oya in the east, Elephant Pass in the north and Anuradhapura in the south.

Under its charge were 51 battalions in the holding role, Area Headquarters Mannar, 21, 56 and 61 Infantry Divisions, Area Headquarters Weli Oya and Task Forces 5 and 6. Three thousand Sri Lankan naval troops, several hundred Air Force personnel, 10,000 policemen and 5,000 Home Guards were also in this sector. Seven offensive formations consisting of 51 battalions were also under Gen Jayasooriya's command. These were: 57, 58 and 59 Infantry Divisions and Task Forces 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8. 55 and 57 Infantry Divisions were later attached from the Jaffna sector.¹¹

The northern campaign began in July 2007, with operations by at least five Infantry Divisions — three from the south and two from Jaffna in the north — several deep-penetration units and a couple of task forces targeting Mannar on the west coast and Mullaithivu on the east coast — all on multiple fronts. The aim was to open the A-32 road from Mannar via Pooneryn to Jaffna, bypassing the main Kandy-Jaffna A-9 Highway, Elephant Pass and Kilinochchi. The SLA had tried opening this road to the north twice in the past but had failed. Plans and objectives changed as operations progressed with amazing success.

Opening an axis of maintenance to the Jaffna garrison was imperative. The security forces took 18 months to turn the LTTE defences at Pooneryn, capture Kilinochchi and Elephant Pass and confine the LTTE to a sliver of coastal territory in Mullaithivu District.

A multi-pronged strategy, with troops advancing on a wide front, ensured that the LTTE was unable to switch forces. While the main thrust was along the A-32, the Tigers were kept guessing by being kept pinned down astride the A-9 as well, by columns moving in from the north from Killaly-Muhumalai-Nagarkovil and from the south along Pulamoddai-Omanthai.¹² In addition, task forces and deep penetration units pierced the gaps between the two-road axes. Coastal access for the LTTE on the east and the west was blocked by coordinated naval and land operations. The newly raised 57 Infantry Division fought a great battle at Silavatturai and Arippe to secure the Mannar-Vavuniya road.¹³ Later, together with 58 Infantry Division, the LTTE was trapped in the Mannar rice bowl and 600 Tigers were killed. The advance along A-32 was initially painstakingly slow, with the troops advancing 8 km in 8 months.

The 59 Infantry Division advanced from Weli Oya towards Mullaithivu and Puthukudaiyiruppu, ensuring that the pincers were multi-directional. Not only did these operations cut off access for the LTTE to Tamil Nadu from Mannar and Mullaithivu, they also curtailed the Sea Tigers' local boat replenishments. Engaging the LTTE on a broad front in the rear and on the flanks turned the table doctrinally on the LTTE: the conventional SLA was fighting using guerilla tactics while the Tigers were being forced to fight conventional set-piece battles. They had made a similar blunder fighting the IPKF for Jaffna in 1987.

Except for limited counter-attacks in Jaffna, the LTTE was never able to mount a counter-offensive or a counter-strike against the SLA, barring local reprisals after the fall of Kilinochchi. The defence of Kilinochchi was gallant, ingenious and based on high bunds interlocking water tanks, laid out in three tiers but oriented mainly towards the south and west. When the LTTE lost Pooneryn and then Kilinochchi, Prabhakaran is believed to have told his Intelligence Chief Pottu Amman that 75 percent of the LTTE's strength had gone downstream and they would have to hold on till the international community could stop the war.

On 02 January 2009, Rajapaksa announced the fall of Kilinochchi as "an unparalleled victory"¹⁴ and asked the LTTE to lay down arms. This resulted in the reopening of the road from Colombo to Jaffna. This road had been closed for 23 years, during which time, the 40,000-strong military garrison in Jaffna was maintained by sea and air at huge cost.¹⁵ In the afterglow of Kilinochchi,

the capture of the strategic Elephant Pass in the north (which the security forces had lost to the LTTE in 2000, in a disaster reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu) went unheralded.

Suffering a string of military defeats, the LTTE, which had earlier boasted the Kilinochchi would never fall, vowed to fight on even without it. B Nadesan, the leader of LTTE's political wing, described the defeat as an “insignificant” setback to the liberation struggle.¹⁶

Eight columns consisting of 120,000 soldiers of 53, 55 and 58 Infantry Divisions and Task Force 8 closed in on Mullaithivu from the west, along A-35 and A-34 roads, as well as from the north and south along the coast. The failed counter-attack following the loss of Putukkudiyirruppu and Ananthapuram cost the LTTE 623 fighters, including Col Theepan, the northern force commander. Some commanders had asked to withdraw but Prabhakaran rejected any relocation. The Tigers were ultimately boxed into an area of 1,000 sq km, with 3,000 hardcore fighters, backed by 300,000 civilians, who, according to the government, were being used as human shields. The Tigers' last ditch stand was close to their coastal stronghold Mullaithivu, which they had seized from the SLA in 1996.

The Last Battle

On 27 April 2009, the SLG announced the end of the use of heavy weapons, including aircraft and aerial weapons. By then, the LTTE was confined to a 8 km sliver of the coast, along with some civilians, in what was designated as a No Fire Zone (NFZ). A humanitarian rescue mission was planned as part of “Operation Final Countdown”. By 02 May, 60,000 troops from 53, 58 and 59 Infantry Divisions and Task Force 8 had established a double ring around the NFZ, which had its two flanks resting on the sea and Nanthikadal lagoon. On the coastal front, the Navy had set up a four-layered blockade, consisting of FACs, offshore patrol vessels, gun boats, and units of Special Boat and Rapid Action Boat Squadrons, backed by UAVs.

The SLA was mulling three options: surgical strikes, amphibious assaults and ground operations. By 11 May, the conflict zone had changed names. The NFZ was redesignated as the New Safety Zone (NSZ) and shrunk to 1.5 sq km with 700 Tigers and 50,000 civilians. The SLA referred to it as an internal hostage crisis. The last batch of civilians vacated the NSZ by 15 May.¹⁷

Contrary to SLA calculations, the LTTE was neither going to jump into the sea nor resort to mass suicide. They had other ideas. Prabhakaran asked Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP) to negotiate a surrender to a third party. But this notion was rejected by the SLG. Phone calls between the LTTE and the UN were facilitated by officials of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombo. However, Eric Solheim's failure to broker a ceasefire and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) electoral defeat in India closed the LTTE's hopes of external intervention and left it with one desperate option: breaking out of the NSZ.

The impossible escape plan had three phases: in the first phase, a group led by Prabhakaran would cross the Nanthikadal lagoon, and disperse in three groups in the east; in the second phase, a group led by B Nadesan was to negotiate a surrender for the sick and wounded; and in the third, a rearguard action was to be led by Prabhakaran's son Charles Antony. The breakout commenced on 17 May, and by the next day, it was all over; not one Tiger was traced alive. Even the Nadesan group, apparently waving white flags, was gunned down. This would become a controversial issue during the Presidential elections of January 2010, when Gen Sarath Fonseka made reference to in an interview, and subsequently, denied doing so.¹⁸ Although Prabhakaran was declared dead on 19 May, the curtains came down on Eelam War IV in the early hours of 18 May, after the 22-hour battle culminated in the death of 18 top LTTE leaders and at least 250 hardcore fighters.¹⁹

Before this battle began, given the immense international pressure for a ceasefire and safe passage, there was trepidation of a US-led, UK and France-supported rescue mission. The SLA was under great pressure to rapidly terminate operations and had waited till the national elections in Tamil Nadu were over on 13 May and the results of the Indian general election made public by 16 May. The last battle was carefully calibrated by the SLA with these election dates in mind.

Just as the late Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne had announced on 20 March 1990 that Sri Lanka was free of the last IPKF soldier, Mahinda Rajapaksa declared on 18 May 2009 that Sri Lanka was free from terrorism. The cost of victory ignored the international approbation, charges of genocide and war crimes and a humanitarian catastrophe. There were reports of 20,000 dead in the NSZ between 22 April and 19 May.²⁰

Opposing Strategies

SLG officials claim that, unlike in the past, when a military campaign was meant to achieve a draw, this one was fought for a decisive victory. In other words, the objective was not negotiations with the LTTE but its destruction. This may not have been entirely the case during the fight but is considered to have been the objective, after the fact. Just as India's objectives in East Pakistan in 1971 were initially limited to territorial gains and not the capture of Dacca, the SLG started the northern offensive solely to open an alternate access to Jaffna along the A-32. This was not the first time that such an attempt was made. The initial objective was to weaken the LTTE enough to bring it to the negotiating table.

Engaging the LTTE on a wide front (causing heavy attrition) impaired the Tigers' war-fighting capacity. On the battlefield, Gen Fonseka's motto was: "Go for the kill, maximum casualties and destruction of the infrastructure of the enemy with minimum possible damage to the troops,"²¹ so much so that a Cabinet Minister remarked, "We were surprised India let us continue operations after the fall of Kilinochchi". Attrition, and not territory, was the initial goal. It was only when the LTTE resistance began crumbling that the liberation of territory became a political necessity and the endgame of destroying the LTTE appeared achievable.

To maintain the Jaffna garrison, Kanakesanthurai Harbour and Palaly Airfield were vital logistic bases as there were no land lines of resupply. The A-9 was under LTTE control. Pooneryn and Elephant Pass along with the Paranthan road junction were strategic pivots, all in LTTE possession. Pooneryn had to be cleared to deny the LTTE a base to bomb Palaly Airfield, as also to patch the causeway across the Jaffna Lagoon to open the alternate land route outflanking Elephant Pass. The Paranthan junction offered multiple options for operations towards Mullaithivu along A-35, south towards Kilinochchi and north to Elephant Pass, the narrow strip of land which connected the mainland with Jaffna Peninsula.

LTTE had always coveted Elephant Pass and had tried desperately to seize it through an amphibious assault in 1991. They succeeded in their second attempt in April 2000, uncovering Jaffna and leading to the rout of the SLA. The fall of Pooneryn – seized by the LTTE in the mid-1990s when the SLA evacuated the garrison in an unfortunate move during the northern offensive

– was the turning point of the war. It uncovered Jaffna as well as Kilinochchi and struck a catastrophic blow to the LTTE.

Traditionally, the dividing line between the LTTE and Sri Lankan security forces ran horizontally from Mannar-Vavuniya to the east coast, with the LTTE in control in the north. SLG was content in holding Jaffna-Palaly in the north and Trincomalee harbour, which it was prepared to defend at all costs. The government was most worried about Jaffna, which it had nearly lost after the debacle at Elephant Pass in 2000. No previous government had tried to break the status quo and the division of territory till the arrival of President Rajapaksa. As the 2002 CFA froze large scale operations, the Tigers tried taking Trincomalee by stealth and triggered the war. The seeds of Eelam War IV were sown at Mavil Aru when the LTTE tried to expand its encroachments around Trincomalee. The loss of Kilinochchi transformed the horizontal boundary into a vertical one running along the A-9 from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya. The Tigers were squeezed into the shrinking perimeter north of Mullaithivu, reduced from a territory of 15,000 sq km to land the size of a football field. Mullaithivu town was recaptured on 25 January 2009 after 13 years, but not without losing 1,200 SLA personnel.

The LTTE, too thin on the ground, was forced to hold every inch of ground in a wide arc. This was a tough call, even for the LTTE. Instead of changing tactics, it fought a superior Army, highly outnumbered and out-gunned, on its own terms. It had no Plan B and concentrated all its fighters and leaders in a diminishing box, off the Mullaithivu coast, in the hope that either the international community or India [if the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was returned to power] would intervene on their behalf.

Creating Capabilities: Sri Lankan Military and the LTTE

Transforming the Sri Lankan Army (SLA)

The failed suicide attacks against Gen Fonseka in April 2006 and Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa in December 2006 provided the stimulus for the transformation of the Army. After the epic defeat at Elephant Pass in 2000, a former SLA chief privately admitted that the SLA was a “funk army”. To its discredit were a string of major setbacks: being routed at Mullaithivu, evacuating Pooneryn and other SLA bases, suffering enormous casualties and

the loss of extensive military equipment in the early and mid-1990s. By the late 1990s, the weapons seized from SLA comprised nearly two-thirds of the LTTE's heavy equipment and half its small arms.

The desertion rate, uniformly high at 10 to 15 percent, was brought down by half during Fonseka's term. At any point in time, 65,000 Army deserters were at large, with another 2,000 in prison. Much was made of the military as national heroes to boost its morale to defeat the Tigers. Yet, as late as 23 January 2009, the editorial of the Colombo-based *Island* newspaper commented, "You cannot win this war." Around the same time, two former Army Chiefs and an Air Chief said: "Our soldiers do not know how to fight." These assertions misinterpreted the mood of the Army and the fundamental changes in ethos, culture and procedures brought about by Fonseka in the SLA.

Fonseka overhauled the SLA's battle-fighting techniques, tactics and strategy, enabled by a free hand in resources and command. Later a folk hero, Fonseka was paid enviable tributes, such as being compared to Lord Nelson and described by several leaders as the "best Army Commander in the world". He was promoted to Chief of Defence Staff and the Opposition parties wanted him to stand as their candidate for the Presidential elections in 2010. Contesting and losing the elections made Fonseka a "traitor" for his opponents, especially after the interview he gave to *The Sunday Leader* over alleged human rights violations during the last phase of the battle.

Eighty thousand Army recruits were taken in, doubling the SLA's strength to 200,000. In 2008 alone, 40,000 troops were added to raise 47 Infantry Battalions, 13 Brigades, four Task Forces and two Divisions. The SLA grew from nine to 13 Divisions, three Task Forces and one Armoured Brigade, with other ancillaries. The military's strength touched 350,000, increasing defence expenditure to an average of \$ 1.74 billion — 17 percent of the total expenditure. Military equipment was acquired on fast track, frequently involving presidential intervention and travel by Gothabaya Rajapaksa to the countries providing it.

Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF)

The Air Force did not lag behind in tactical innovation. Pilots dissected past flying operations for lessons. Deep penetration units of the Army and

Intelligence squads which had infiltrated Tiger defences were able to vector attacks, taking out several top Tiger leaders with air-delivered precision guided munitions provided by Pakistan. Chief of the Air Staff Air Marshal Roshan Gunatilleke steadfastly refuted the allegation that Pakistan Air Force (PAF) pilots flew their aircraft. However, the PAF has had a long history of joint training and cooperation with the SLAF and invariably a senior PAF officer has been Pakistan's High Commissioner in Colombo.

The SLAF launched 3,000 missions with an estimated 15,000 sorties, of which 1,900 targets were in the east with three fighter squadrons – Kfirs, MiG-27 and F-7 and one squadron of Mi-24 helicopters. Before Eelam War IV, foreign pilots did fly operational missions – in one instance, a Russian pilot was killed when his Mi-24 was brought down by an LTTE missile. The cardinal war-winning factor was air supremacy created by the SLAF, with no effective ground fire, and the LTTE totally dry in Surface-to-Air Missile (SAMs) stocks.

Sri Lankan Navy (SLN)

If there was one single military action that tilted the balance in favour of government forces, it was identifying and destroying the LTTE's supply chain together with its floating warehouses. An elaborate undercover operation was launched for the purpose of locating LTTE gunrunners on the high seas. Painstaking intelligence analysis, picture building through captured/destroyed documents from gunrunning fishing trawlers, maritime reconnaissance and the capture of an LTTE boat by Maldivian Coast Guards in May 2007 helped in targeting the LTTE supply network. Between 2006 and 2008, 32 encounters took place at sea, in which 11 LTTE warehouse ships containing over 10,000 tonnes of war-related material – 80,000 artillery rounds, 100,000 mortar shells, several bulletproof jeeps, three dismantled aircraft, torpedoes, SAMs, radar, high-power outboard motors (OBMs) – were captured/destroyed.²²

Palitha Kohona, Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative at the UN, stated in October 2009 that following its defeat, the LTTE's networks were being utilised for arms smuggling and drug-trafficking in the international arena.²³ Eight LTTE naval vessels, including three large warehouse ships, were sunk, the latter outside the Indian Ocean. By mid-2007, when the replenishment chain had been severely disrupted, it was appreciated that the security forces

had an 18-month window to launch operations against the LTTE. By late 2008, the LTTE were known to have four remaining merchant vessels registered under two companies in Panama and Bahamas, with their operatives in the UK and the Philippines.²⁴ By early 2009, the LTTE had lost 20 Sea Tigers' bases.²⁵

The SLN continued littoral fighting by isolating the LTTE's seaborne connectivity between the North and East, confining LTTE activities to land, leaving a 20-km-wide sea face off Mullaithivu under their control. Naval operations along the Mannar Coast secured the western flank of the ground offensive along A-32. Yet, as late as 20 January 2009, Sea Tigers' suicide boats had sunk an FAC. A four-tier blockade of the NSZ in place by May 2009 spelt the demise of the Tigers, its Navy having been systematically crippled.

LTTE

Ironically, the chief liability of the LTTE had become its leader, Prabhakaran, who, by creating the world's deadliest guerilla force, became obsessed with a military solution despite being offered several political alternatives. His monolithic and egocentric leadership style did not encourage the free exchange of ideas and was the lament of the decision-making process.²⁶ Prabhakaran built up the LTTE from barely 40 cadres and 25 weapons in 1983 to a triad of guerilla and conventional fighter on land, sea and in the air.²⁷ There is no LTTE minus Prabhakaran. The two are synonymous.²⁸

According to John Oskar Solnes, Prabhakaran was a very difficult interlocutor, a deeply reclusive, autocratic and anarchist leader. He lacked the will to solve problems through compromise. He demonstrated a callous lack of concern for civilian casualties, as did his opponents.

Rejection of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA) of 1987, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991, the offer of federalism in 2002, and not reconciling to a political solution even after Karuna's defection, comprised Prabhakaran's inventory of strategic blunders. He eliminated all rival armed Tamil groups to become the "sole representative" of the Tamil cause: in his vision, an independent Tamil state alias Eelam. He wanted to become king of Tamil Eelam with support from elements in South India.²⁹

Jeffrey Lumstead, former US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, has said that the Tamil Tigers rebel outfit is a Sri Lankan phenomenon and "that it has no

links to any other terrorist group in the world.”³⁰ This is not entirely true, as it did have connections with the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba in Pakistan and some insurgent groups in India, in particular, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). After the terror attack against the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in March 2009, these links were being investigated. More recently, reports have appeared about Indian Maoists/Naxals receiving training assistance from the LTTE.

Security expert Zachary Abuza offers this appreciation of the Tamil Tigers: “An organisation that has been, bar none, the most cutting edge, adaptive and creative terrorist organization in the world and there is not a terrorist organisation in the world that has not adopted LTTE tactics or at least aspired to do so.”³¹

LTTE’s track record is phenomenal. It is the original inventor of the human bomber, pioneered through the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in India. Its suicide vest design has been copied by many organisations. It was the first to launch suicide naval attacks in January 1999 (more than 60 till 2008), seven years before the USS *Cole* attack. It has also employed suicide frogmen and other special operations behind enemy lines. The LTTE became the first sub-state actor to acquire an Air Force and launch nine attacks from seven airfields between March 2007 and 21 February 2009, the last being a Kamikaze attack mounted from a shrinking box of territory around Mullaithivu. It has used female bombers in more than 3:2 ratio.³²

The LTTE has launched upwards of 315 suicide attacks, more than any one organisation and more than Hamas and Hezbollah combined. President Rajapaksa, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Gen Fonseka have escaped from LTTE suicide attacks. Two attempts to target the President were foiled in 2008-09. Its cadres lived by the cult of the cyanide capsule strung around the neck. Its battlefield innovations were as striking as the improvisations in equipment, notably the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and the Johnny mine, both of which were perfected for sophistication in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Equally remarkable was the Tigers’ international network in finance, logistics and arms procurement. These ventures by the Snow Tigers were under Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP), till he was captured in Malaysia in a brilliant Sri Lankan undercover operation and brought to Colombo in August 2009.³³ The definitive book on terrorist financing was authored by

the LTTE. Counter-terrorist specialist Sankara Jayasekera told *Lakbima News* in Colombo on 17 September 2009 that the LTTE has a presence in 44 countries with established structures in 12 of them. The one million-strong Tamil diaspora and the local Tamils together provided it close to \$ 300 million a year, though more conservative estimates put the revenue stream between \$ 50 to 80 million a year.

The LTTE is known to have started Eelam War IV with 30,000 trained cadres.³⁴ The actual figure may have been about half of that, given that 6,000 cadres left with Karuna and the east was the main recruitment base. Hence, the heavy reliance on child soldiers, with 60 percent being under the age of 18.

The LTTE's decline since 2006 was surprisingly swift; clearly, 30 years of war wreaked havoc on the society and proved to be a demographic catastrophe.³⁵ At the time of the 2002 Norway-brokered CFA, the LTTE was politically and militarily strong, having weathered four wars — three against government forces and one against the IPKF. It was at the pinnacle of its power and could dictate the terms of the CFA, securing parity with the state and recognition as the sole representatives of the Tamils, a status denied to it in the past.³⁶ The five-year lull of ceasefire engendered a sense of hope of ending hostilities amongst the lower rungs of the LTTE, while Prabhakaran used the interregnum to rebuild his war-waging capacity. Reducing Ranil Wickeremesinghe to redundancy after he lost the elections to Rajapaksa (largely due to the LTTE's boycott of the elections) was a fatal error. The LTTE also failed to defend its reputation with human rights organisations and other international watchdogs during the conduct of the war.

The assassination of the then-Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, who was a Tamil, was another mistake which antagonised the international community and led to the LTTE being banned in 32 countries, seriously undermining its financing network. Prabhakaran failed to redeem the LTTE's relations with India and tap support from Tamil Nadu. Similarly, he made no effort to patch up with Karuna to bolster his fighting machine.³⁷

On the battlefield, Prabhakaran repeatedly made the error of fighting a conventional battle instead of employing superior guerrilla tactics, the same error he made in 1987 when fighting the IPKF for Jaffna. The LTTE waged fixed defensive battles without any recourse to offensive action. It initiated

the 'lose no territory' ditch-cum-bund strategy of the Indian Army to their peril as the SLA turned the tables by adopting unconventional tactics. Further, herding all the civilians from captured areas to areas under its control after the fall of Kilinochchi turned out to be a double-edged strategy and gave away the game plan.

Prabhakaran overestimated the clout of the diaspora and the pro-Tigers lobby in Tamil Nadu as well as the influence of the West and India to stop the war. The government in Tamil Nadu was able to secure two limited ceasefires (1-3 February and 3-4 April 2009) but in the run up to the crucial last battle, it could only get a false end to combat operations. Prabhakaran also misread Rajapaksa, assuming that like other Sri Lankan leaders, he would try to weaken, not vanquish, the Tigers, to bring them to the negotiating table. He underestimated the new SLA, mistaking it for the spent force of the past. Unable to revive the supply chain, procure anti-aircraft weapons and recruit Tigers, the LTTE's descent into defeat was still surprising. In desperation, they had even sought nuclear weapons.³⁸ It is not that the LTTE performed below par — rather, that the government forces punched far above their weight.

For the invincible Tigers and their supreme commander Prabhakaran, it was the ultimate irony to be besieged and have to sue for ceasefire and safe passage. But the final breakout from the NSZ was no less gallant than the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Casualties

There is a great deal of confusion about the exact number of casualties. According to Gen Fonseka, 15,000 LTTE cadres were killed in the last two and a half years of the war, with 4,073 being killed in 2007-08. In the same period, 2,000 SLA personnel were killed. Ministry of Defence figures mention 22,000 rebels killed and 10,000 wounded since July 2006, with 9,000 to 11,000 having surrendered. Its own casualties are given as 190 officers and 5,200 soldiers killed and 27,000 wounded.³⁹

Winning Formula

Conventional wisdom suggests that in insurgency situations, militaries should create conditions conducive to the application of a political solution, a

military solution being neither achievable nor worth the enormous attendant collateral costs. The recent success of the SLG has demonstrated that given the right conditions, a decisive battlefield victory is possible.⁴⁰ “For all those who argue that there is no military solution for terrorism, we have two words: Sri Lanka.”⁴¹ Actually, it should have read: Mahinda Rajapaksa. Edward Luttwak’s theory of allowing war to run to its logical conclusion rather than interrupted by foreign intervention, in “Give War a Chance”, a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article, must have been studied by President Rajapaksa or his advisors. He stonewalled Western and UN attempts to force a ceasefire. Sinhalese nationalists called it “defiance” and “showing the West its place”. Yet, it must be said that though military coercion works in extremely limited and localised conditions, all-out use of force has heavy costs attached to it. Whether military success will translate into an enduring political solution is never guaranteed. India’s military success in 1971 eluded any political gains.

What is most striking about the outcome of the war is not just the complete elimination of the LTTE as an organised military force, but also the decapitation of its entire leadership and capacity to wage guerilla war. Gen Fonseka had said that the LTTE had become a spent force, it had lost its capability as a conventional Army and that 95 percent of the war was over.⁴²

Until six weeks before the end of hostilities, both Fonseka and Gotabaya Rajapaksa and several counter-insurgency experts were visualising a residual insurgency, which did not follow as Prabhakaran had failed to disperse leaders and assets to continue the Eelam struggle. There was no Plan B. Similarly, chances of the resurgence of the insurgency at a later date are remote as there will be little or no support from the West, India and the diaspora.⁴³ Nipping any leftover threat in the bud is part of the SLG’s counter-terrorism strategy, which includes adding another 100,000 soldiers to ensure that the LTTE does not raise its head again.⁴⁴ How seriously this threat was taken at one time can be gauged by Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s statement that counterinsurgency operations to search and destroy the LTTE’s residual military capacity, in sync with the strategy of keeping the Tigers separated from the Tamils, will render them like fish out of water.⁴⁵ The Global Tamil Forum, which met in London in March 2010, urged for solidarity among the Tamils. The international wing of the LTTE has set up a Provisional

Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam. The new Army Commander, Lt Gen Jagath Jayasooriya, has said that the concept of Tamil Eelam is not dead among the diaspora.

President Rajapaksa has stated that there are sleeping cadres and trained suicide bombers who are still around, and interested parties, especially outside Sri Lanka, who want to revive the LTTE. "It has been just nine months since the war ended. Just because the leaders were eliminated, it is not over. The movement will take some more time. They were a factory of suicide bombers."⁴⁶

What the IPKF could not do – defeat the LTTE – the SLA has done, demonstrating that an insurgency can be subdued with the right mix of strategy, resources and political will.⁴⁷ When years of negotiation did not bear fruit, a determined military campaign ended the violence, in order for a political solution to take root. The winning formula could not have been cobbled without Delhi's passive and active assistance. Just as India took a strategic decision in 2005 to support the Maoists and the political formations in Nepal to oust King Gyanendra, it decided to support Mahinda Rajapaksa in destroying the LTTE, which was fast becoming a regional threat. In *Sri Lanka: From War to Peace*, Nitin Gokhale provides the depth and range of covert Indian political, military and diplomatic assistance, most crucially military intelligence, to Sri Lanka.⁴⁸ The importance of India's assistance to Colombo in winning the war has not been fully explored. Sri Lanka's Health Minister Sripala Desilva told Parliament soon after the war ended that it could not have been won without help from India. India helped behind the scenes, providing crucial strategic intelligence, especially on the high seas, in sinking LTTE ships. A small Signals Intelligence detachment was established in the Indian High Commission in Colombo, which was interacting with the Sri Lankan military on a day-to-day basis. According to Razik Zarook, Special Advisor to President Rajapaksa, India stands as Sri Lanka's best friend. India had to help not just to suppress LTTE terrorism but also to minimise China and Pakistan's influence. "India was constrained from selling offensive weapons and objected to our acquisitions from China and Pakistan for public consumption but knew we had to have the stores."⁴⁹ Military assistance came from Israel, Ukraine — in fact, any government which was ready to provide arms was contacted and weapons obtained. In an interview, Zarook said:

It will not be in India's interest not to have close relations with Sri Lanka and keep us from having good relations with China, with whom we already have good relations. If India tries to stop Sri Lanka, Colombo will get even closer to China. That is why India helped to get \$ 2.5 b loan from IMF to meet its debt. Otherwise, we would have had to go to China. India is driven by strategic interests. We understand, we will maintain friendly balance.⁵⁰

India has invested heavily in Sri Lanka over the last three decades so that Sri Lanka Tamils can live as equal citizens, enjoying a degree of political power and autonomy. Unfortunately, New Delhi's policy has been erratic and deficient in its resolve in having its political agenda in Sri Lanka implemented. President Rajapaksa has run circles around India's top leaders and bureaucrats and not conceded an iota of political power. With the elimination of the LTTE, India's strategic marginalisation is an impending reality. Puncturing the myth of LTTE invincibility was an idea Mahinda Rajapaksa did not believe possible at the commencement of the campaign. Synchronising political military and diplomatic tools was the war-winning trio of Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sarath Fonseka. To this set, one could add the name of Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The canvas of the 30-year war was transformed by politically tweaking euphemisms for armed struggle: ethnic conflict was termed "war on terrorism"; a distinction was made between the Tamils and the LTTE; the armed campaign was called a "humanitarian offensive to liberate Tamils from the clutches of the LTTE"; and the last battle referred to as the world's biggest hostage-rescue humanitarian mission. Characterising it as domestic terrorism ensured minimal external interference in combating it. India, China and Pakistan were kept on board, especially the latter two, which became key suppliers of military hardware, and Pakistan, critically, for training the SLAF.

Nimble-footed diplomacy ensured that the LTTE was banned in 32 countries, seriously undermining its funding and arms resupply networks. Friendly countries helped parry calls for ceasefire and ward off charges of war crimes and genocide at the Human Rights Council in Geneva. But first, a favourable environment had to be created for the military offensive. The

all-out military campaign was executed with unprecedented military resolve: a clear aim, unrestricted resources and outstanding leadership, which was given a free hand. The 'fight to finish' strategy evolved over time was spurred by rapid gains on the ground. Air supremacy, precision-guided attacks taking out top Tiger leaders and an acute shortage of manpower reduced the LTTE to fighting a series of withdrawals, ultimately confining it to a box.

The soldiers were hailed as national heroes and the country's outlook on defence and freedom of the motherland from terrorism changed dramatically. The military was insulated from media criticism by weaning away the propaganda initiative from the LTTE. A virtual media gag was imposed in the combat zone and the foreign media was kept out. The Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) was a single window concept designed for countering LTTE propaganda.⁵¹ A strengthened Defence Ministry media initiative ensured that the LTTE lost the media war they had always won in the past. The domination of information space ensured operations were conducted in a blanket of secrecy, except for government handouts. All international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) except the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – which was also asked to leave before the last battle – were expelled from the north.

A brilliantly conceived and fought campaign ended in unqualified military success but at horrendous human cost, attracting wide criticism from the international community. Given the unprecedented backing from the majority Sinhalese community for the war, Rajapaksa was able to deflect all domestic and foreign opposition to its conduct. Sinhalese chauvinism was epitomised in Gotabaya Rajapaksa's remarks: "I have only two groups — the people who fight terrorism and the terrorists."⁵²

The LTTE is known to have established a Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam overseas, which the SLG is determined to dissolve. Colombo will establish a new mission in Eritrea, the hotbed of terrorism and revitalise its activities in Myanmar to cripple the foreign connection.⁵³ The recent arrest of the richest Sri Lankan Tamil in the US, Rajarathinam, is good news for Sri Lanka. The consolidation of military success is being pursued at home to ensure that the LTTE never raises its ugly head again, either at home or abroad, by targeting the Tigers networks along with the diaspora. Lankans hold that victory is now complete, with only a shadow of the LTTE

left. Further, they believe that the war was fought for a unitary state, not an ethnicity-based federal solution. But the cause that led to the insurgency has been brushed aside. In one more move to buy time over a power-sharing agreement with the Tamils (the Tamil National Alliance having dropped its demand for a separate state and pushing for regional autonomy), President Rajapaksa has appointed a committee to study the root causes of the ethnic conflict.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has set a new paradigm on the use of force, but incurred huge humanitarian and diplomatic costs for its all-out use of force. Denying observer access to the battlefield drew charges from the West of “having something to hide”. The European Union has been threatening to withdraw the ‘GSP plus’ trade concession, which allows for the duty-free import of textile goods from Sri Lanka to the European Union, unless Sri Lanka improves its human rights record.⁵⁵ UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has decided to appoint, in the face of Sri Lankan opposition, an expert panel to advise him on alleged human rights abuses and possible war crimes during the last phase of the military campaign.⁵⁶

There are lessons to be learnt from Sri Lanka’s military success. But whether countries are able and willing to apply military force in the face of external criticism and threats of sanctions will depend on the political and diplomatic preparations before such a campaign. India could almost never emulate this model as it believes in bringing insurgents to the negotiating table to join the political process.⁵⁷ It follows a policy of minimum force applied in good faith, with the use of heavy weapons and air power almost always avoided. Other countries that are faced with insurgency problems, and are not ideologically constrained on use of force, have many lessons to learn from the Sri Lankan success story, in areas like clarity of mission, unity of effort, politico-military resolve, national will and non-interference by politicians in military operations. The core military lessons will come from the counter-insurgency doctrine and tactics, and tailoring and training a conventional Army to fight unconventionally. The SLA has shown the world how to engage in rural and urban counter-insurgency against a wily enemy. The armies of Israel, Pakistan and Thailand have already evinced interest in

imbibing military lessons, especially in the concept of deep penetration units and overcoming ditch-cum-bunds obstacles.

This sharing of operational experience – using lessons transferable to the internal insurgency environment of another country – like the conception of an operational doctrine and inviting foreign students to training schools are practical takeaways from Sri Lanka's counter-insurgency experience.⁵⁸

When both sides are pursuing a military solution, one would have expected a stalemate. By shaping the internal and external environment, Mahinda Rajapaksa's winning team was able to convert past defeats into victory, in which India played a decisive role in keeping the LTTE's head down. In a dig at India, some Sri Lankans say that the LTTE, which was to be disarmed by the IPKF in 72 hours, took 25 years. A former Army Commander told the author at the time of the departure of the IPKF from Sri Lanka: "Were India to leave us alone, we would be able to sort out the LTTE." More recently, a SLN officer proudly noted, "The war started by you (IPKF) has been finished by us."

Notes

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