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The Killer Tiger Roared:

A Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan “Kinetic” Counterinsurgency and its Theoretical Implications

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom and recent developments in the study of the art of conducting “traditional” counterinsurgency (COIN) has defined the importance of a population-centric approach to COIN in which a “whole of government”, integrated political component is central to an effective partnership with the host nation in ultimately defeating the insurgency.

Using an analysis of the COIN campaign in Sri Lanka against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, this study contends that governments conducting COIN against an insurgency that has a primary focus on military-kinetic operations, and not on building political legitimacy with the population, *can* defeat the insurgency by **competitively executing** a hyper-kinetic COIN strategy, in which political reform is not emphasized, political strategy is diminished, and armed force “kinetic” operations are mainly utilized.

This study further extends this strategic comparison to encompass a renewed outlook on COIN strategy: that COIN, in both Foreign Internal Defense and Internal COIN, is a strategic *competition* with the nature of the insurgency itself, through the principle of *adaptive competitive strategic advantage*; and as such, any predisposition to a “population-centric” approach is a fallacy in outlook.

The article demonstrates, in its analysis of Internal COIN, that the nature of counterinsurgency for a particular campaign is defined by the nature of the insurgency *as well as* the nature of the counterinsurgent force, and not merely by executing the staple strategy of winning the “hearts and minds” of an indigenous population without prior proper analysis.

Background

Irregular warfare is far more intellectual than a bayonet charge.

-T.E. Lawrence

Counterinsurgency is a phenomenon as old as warfare itself. Armies from the Romans in Palestine during the era of Christ to the modern-day North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan have attempted to combat insurgencies and restore solidified government control in contested areas. The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 defines insurgency as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict,”¹ and counterinsurgency as simply “those

¹ US Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (US Army Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5), First Pub. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 385.

military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”² Inherently a political process at heart, perhaps more so than “conventional warfare”, the nature of insurgency is a phenomenon which has troubled many agents of society—from policy makers, to the civilian population in which the insurgency resides, to the government and counterinsurgent force which much deal with the insurgency itself. With such a wide encompassing area of possible operational variables to consider, much work over many years by many practitioners of COIN and academics alike has focused on studying and analyzing the nature of the most effective strategy to combat insurgencies in many different scenarios. The analysis of insurgency as a force within a wider conflict is a topic historians, strategists, and military theorists have tried to generate on a macro-scale. Among these endeavors, observations of seemingly common patterns have emerged in multiple historical and ongoing COIN campaigns. Most prominently, a population-centric approach has been the cornerstone of modern-era counterinsurgency; this strategy shifts the primary focus of the counterinsurgent to adopting a “whole-of-government[s]” approach by: securing and protecting the population, removing population centers from the control and influence of the insurgency, improving host-nation governance capability and capacity in these areas, incorporating political, economic, agricultural, police, etc. reforms to achieve maximum institutional capacity to extend services to civilians, and enabling host-nation security forces to degrade, diminish and “out-govern” the insurgency.

Generalized observations are not unbreakable principles, or such that is common in all insurgencies, however; indeed, there are no “Fundamental Laws of Counterinsurgency”, or as Dr. David Kilcullen, a respected former Australian military officer and counterinsurgency scholar, states, “As we all know, there is no such thing as a ‘standard’ counterinsurgency.”³ The specified nature of the circumstances in which any particular insurgency derives its existence, and thrives upon, makes this task of generalized analysis a complex one, in the least. The geography of conflict, both in the physical respect and with respect to the character of the competing insurgents and counterinsurgents, defines the nature of the conflict, and as such, the nature of the strategy to combat the insurgency which has the potential to be most pragmatic, efficient, and in the end, successful.

And so the major conventional wisdom to population-centric counterinsurgency goes. Eminent counterinsurgent Colonel David Galula, a French military officer who served in Algeria, wrote in the epic *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, “A revolutionary war is 20 per cent military action and 80 per cent political.”⁴

Then in May of 2009, an event occurred which flew in the face of the modern day counterinsurgency theory maxim that concludes that the population-centric approach is inherently the most effective since the center of gravity lies with the population. This event was Sri Lanka’s decisive defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a 26-year insurgency which fought ruthlessly for the creation of a separate homeland for the minority Tamil community. The methods and strategy used by the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa were often contrary to the classic “protect-the-population” principle which governs mainstream counterinsurgency theory;

² *Ibid.*, 383.

³ Kilcullen, David, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183.

⁴ Galula, David, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 63.

conversely, the government adopted a ruthless enemy-centric, military-first, highly kinetic counterinsurgency strategy, shelling civilian areas and Tamil civilians who were being used as human shields according to Human Rights Watch.⁵ Robert Kaplan wrote in *The Atlantic* that “the Sri Lankan government made no progress against the insurgents for nearly a quarter century, until they turned to extreme and unsavory methods,” “using techniques...which the United States could and should never employ.”⁶ A *New York Times* article summed up the government’s tactics, stating that the Rajapaksa government “defied international pressure to stanch civilian casualties, squelched dissent, blocked independent reporting of the war and achieved what many had thought all but impossible [due to these tactics]: they vanquished the Tamil Tigers, who had waged a pitiless war of terror and once ruled swaths of Sri Lankan territory as a de facto state.”⁷

Classic counterinsurgency stresses, as Dr. James S. Corum states in *Bad Strategies: How Major Powers Fail in Counterinsurgency*, that “success in such conflicts normally requires winning the support of the population,” that “in conflict with non-state forces there are rarely clearly identifiable military centers of gravity to attack,” and essentially that “the military side is only one part—and not necessarily the most important part—of a good strategy...[which is about] nation building and addressing the needs of the population.”⁸ Yet in Sri Lanka, “hearts and minds took a backseat to shock and awe,”⁹ as Lionel Beehner puts it. So how was it that this strategy, which lies in direct contrast to “conventional” counterinsurgency wisdom, succeeded? With virtually no consideration made for gaining political control over the population and marginalizing the insurgency from them, in direct contradiction to western models of effective counterinsurgency, how was the Government of Sri Lanka successful in defeating its protracted, bloody insurgency?

The highly-fluid and ever changing quality of insurgent warfare necessarily dictates that an effective counterinsurgency strategy, no matter what the focus is, is one that itself changes and adapts to the strategic environment, effectively maintaining a constant edge over the insurgency’s strategy and continually diminishing its ability to operate tactically and from achieving its strategic goals. In essence, whether the successful COIN strategy is population-centric or not, it must always *adapt* to the insurgency and strategically match, outperform, and defeat it. Indeed, it is this characteristic which can most readily explain the outcome of the atypical Sri Lankan COIN campaign; this specific quality will be labeled by this article as **“Adaptive Competitive Strategic Advantage.”**

A note on methodology: I have studied numerous accounts of Sri Lanka’s approach to counterinsurgency from practitioners and academics alike. My observations, analysis and conclusions encompasses concurring as well as dissenting views on the subject, ranging from articles in periodicals to literature on counterinsurgency to pieces in related journals. I would like to specifically mention the impact of *Small Wars Journal* as a reliable medium of which I have referenced as a base to gain a number of refereed studies, articles, and points of view. From these sources, I have noted general observations, themes and principles, and have formulated a premise to *contribute to*, and not *explain in totality*, the situation at hand.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Sri Lanka: Events of 2009,” *Human Rights Watch World Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010), 347–354.

⁶ Kaplan, Robert, “To Catch a Tiger,” *The Atlantic*, July 2009.

⁷ Sengupta, Somini, “War’s End in Sri Lanka: Bloody Family Triumph,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2009

⁸ Corum, James, *Bad Strategies: How Major Powers Fail in Counterinsurgency* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2008), 24–26.

⁹ Beehner, Lionel, “What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN,” *Small Wars Journal* (2010): 1.

The aim of this study is not to challenge, deny, or contradict any major school of thought or classic perspective which has been thoroughly developed within the counterinsurgency community to date. As stated, the specific nature of any particular situational environment, and that of both the insurgent and counterinsurgent forces, dictates the needed strategic prescription for the most effective counterinsurgency strategy. Any attempt at creating fundamental principles or laws from any *one* particular COIN campaign is inherently flawed—taking observed tendencies, best practices, and common principles of like-campaigns is a different story, however. Instead, this article aims to provide a general overview and analysis of Sri Lanka’s counterinsurgency strategy, particularly in the final phase of the conflict from 2006-2009 known as “Eelam War IV,” and with particular respect to the kinetic and political components to the COIN strategy. From this general analysis, the article establishes the principle of **Adaptive Competitive Strategic Advantage**, and attempts to explain why, even in the face of explicit contradiction to population-centric classic counterinsurgency, this principle illustrates a major reason for the success of the highly-kinetic Rajapaksa counterinsurgency strategy.

The Sri Lankan Insurgency

The Tamils are an ethnic group originally from the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu, brought to Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) during the 19th Century by the British as laborers for the tea and rubber plantations¹⁰. Comprising approximately 9 percent of the population¹¹, the Tamils have had a historically tumultuous relationship with the Buddhist-Sinhalese majority. Following independence in 1948, the Sinhalese, bitter after years of preferential treatment of the Tamils by the British, politically and socially marginalized the Tamil minority by disenfranchising Indian-Tamil workers and passing the “Sinhala Only Act” in 1956, which established the language of the Sinhalese majority as the sole official language of Sri Lanka¹². After years of ethnic tension, a charismatic Tamil, named Velupillai Prabhakaran, formed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1976.

The rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was unremarkable in many respects. Galula provides that for any potential insurgency to gain traction and develop into a politically, militarily, and socially formidable force, it must have an attractive cause, particularly because early and active supporters “have to be recruited by persuasion”¹³. For the Tamil Tigers, a secular nationalist movement advocating the creation of a separate, independent state for the Tamil population in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka¹⁴, identifying and utilizing the cause of nationalist rebellion has proved relatively reliable and central in the formation and crystallization of the movement in its infancy during the early 1980’s. Yet the course that the LTTE took in its evolution during the ensuing roughly 26 year-long insurgency against the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL), as both a political institution and armed insurgent force, is atypical at best, and is a significant factor responsible for the strategic direction of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

¹⁰ Bajoria, Jayshree, “The Sri Lankan Conflict,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 18, 2009.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 12.

¹⁴ Bhattacharji, Preeti, “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 20, 2009.

The Evolution of the LTTE Strategy

The path of the LTTE, from its bold beginning to the force which was defeated in May of 2009, demonstrated both a fundamental shift in strategy and tactics, as well as a shift in force structure and overall objectives, throughout the 26-year insurgency. The LTTE founded its roots in similar terms with many “traditional” insurgent forces, with a tactical focus encompassing objectives such as hit-and-run assaults, political assassinations, suicide bombings and a general strategic focus of population control. The initial operations of the group included pioneering the use of the suicide bombing tactic and conducting over a dozen high-level political assassinations; indeed, the LTTE’s baptism of fire occurred in 1983 when it ambushed a Sri Lankan Army (SLA) convoy and killed thirteen soldiers; ensuing riots killed over 2,000 Tamil civilians, and sparked the continuing insurgency.¹⁵

Yet as later events would show, a combination of internal Sri Lankan political dynamics and combat offensives would irrevocably change the nature of the conflict. After the failure of a Norway-brokered 2002 peace accord, one of nearly half-a-dozen attempted cease-fires, the conflict reignited on a course much different from previous period of the war. Although the GOSL would not formally withdraw from the Norwegian peace settlement until 2008, the assassination of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August 2005 proved immensely effectual in bolstering the Sri Lankan political resolve to defeat the LTTE. The national election in November 2005 brought to power the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by the anti-LTTE hardliner Mahinda Rajapaksa. Allied in a mostly-strong coalition with two other nationalist Sinhalese, anti-LTTE parties, the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the National Heritage Party (JHU)¹⁶, Rajapaksa began to solidify the GOSL’s stance and resolve to defeat the LTTE with unquestionable force; the failure of five previous attempts at peace and negotiations further hardened the support for this tough stance against the LTTE politically. In early and mid-2006, the Sri Lanka Defence Ministry, led by President Rajapaksa’s brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), began offensive operations against the LTTE. The backdrop, foundation, necessary political will, and overwhelming desire to adopt a hyper-kinetic strategy to root out and end the over two-decade long insurgency of the LTTE fell into place and was being implemented.

The previously strongly-held Eastern Province was the scene of a major SLA offensive in August 2006. In an attempt to regain the initiative, the SLA launched a military operation to retake the province and reopen irrigation channels that were closed by the LTTE after its assault on the Mavil Aru gate, “depriving over 20,000 farmers in government-controlled areas of irrigation waters.”¹⁷ These actions may have served to further remove the LTTE from the population, and the GOSL actions aimed at attacking LTTE positions and forces, moves that had the perception of defending the indigenous population (although this was not the tactical nor strategic objective), may have also regained popular support of the population in the Eastern Province for the government, especially after the marginalizing political and governance actions

¹⁵ Bajoria, “The Sri Lankan Conflict,” 2.

¹⁶ K. Alan Kronstadt and Bruce Vaughn, “Sri Lanka: Background and U.S. Relations,” *Congressional Research Service* (2009): 7.

¹⁷ DeSilva-Ranasinghe, Sergei, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan Military’s Counter-Insurgency Operations,” *Future Directions International*, February 12, 2010: 1.

of the LTTE. The resulting battles, including an attack against five SLA military bases south of Trincomalee harbor, clearly shows a desperate LTTE attempting to use principles of maneuver warfare to repel SLA offensive-advances.

A significant factor contributing to the loss of popular support for the LTTE in the Eastern Province and its limited combat capabilities was the 2004 defection of Colonel Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (a.k.a. Colonel Karuna), who led an initial force of approximately 500-600 fighters in the Eastern Province, to the government side. This had a major effect, both on the capabilities of the LTTE as well as the new Rajapaksa COIN commitment. As Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe of Future Directions International found, “The Karuna Group...went underground with 500-600 fighters, defected to the government and was heavily active in operations against the LTTE.”¹⁸ This internal schism contributed to the overriding strategic modification of the LTTE to encompass a conventional outlook on defensive operations in response to renewed SLA (and now Karuna Group) offensives. Ranasinghe continues:

Increasingly, the LTTE in the Eastern Province operated more like a conventional army of occupation, rather than an insurgent force, often arresting, torturing, and killing dozens of Tamil civilians on suspicion of being Karuna Group loyalists or informants.¹⁹

The LTTE began to operate as more of a conventional army against the SLA than as an insurgency utilizing asymmetric tactics. Contrary to its original goals and objectives, the focus of the “insurgency” placed a heavier influence on attaining a greater conventional capacity and more kinetic capabilities, perhaps, arguably, even more so than the eventual goal of secession. David Galula addresses this phenomenon in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, explaining the diminishing importance of the cause:

The importance of a cause, an absolute essential at the outset of an insurgency, decreases progressively as the insurgent acquires strength. The war itself becomes the principal issue, forcing the population to take sides, preferably the winning one.²⁰

Political capacity took a backseat to kinetic abilities, and this directly caused a plummet in popular support for the LTTE in areas it controlled in the run up to “Eelam IV”, the final campaign from roughly 2006 to 2009. Strikingly, Lionel Beehner points out in his analysis of Sri Lanka COIN:

Unlike most violent non-state actors, the LTTE fielded an army of 20,000 well-trained conscripts, a full-flung navy, and even an Air Force. The Tigers purchased GPS systems to accurately target its missile projectiles well before the Sri Lankan military did. They were adept at both guerilla and conventional types of warfare...²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 16.

²¹ Beehner, “What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN,” 3

The Sri Lankan Response

After essentially wrenching control of the Eastern Province and defeating the more-conventionally adept yet relatively conventionally-inferior LTTE, the SLA moved forward to retake the northern stronghold of Vavuniya. The 57th Division of the SLA was deployed, and the LTTE in response recalled much of its direct combat units from other areas of the island to confront the operational threat. General Sarath Fonseka, Chief of Staff of the SLA, stated:

They thought they had developed a conventional army capability. They never wanted the army to come and capture even a small village. We were like two armies fighting. In Vavuniya, to capture some small villages we fought for about eight months without moving.²²

In addition to a rising conventional struggle, the SLA further strategically matched the original and “traditional insurgent” tactics employed and mastered by the LTTE, and began using these tactics to supplement its major maneuver operations against the tactical operations carried out by LTTE units who were also employing a conventional strategy. These “small-unit”, commando-style raids, ambushes, and attacks were increasingly emphasized by the SLA as a useful strategy to counter subversive insurgent attacks. Ranasinghe notes that Gen Fonseka “revamped [infantry doctrine] to emphasize section level small unit infantry operations,” creating the Special Infantry Operations Team (SIOT) concept. “By late 2006, the numbers of SIOT-trained soldiers had increased to around 6,000 from approximately 1,500 prior to the start of hostilities.”²³ Effectively, the SLA engaged in “insurgent” kinetic operations to strategically match the threat posed by the LTTE. This caused a renewed emphasis by the LTTE on its traditional subversive tactics, which had not been the main strategic tactic used since its adopted conventional mindset set in earlier in 2006. The LTTE restarted its insurgent-driven operations in Vavuniya as a further strategic match to the robust Special Forces and commando raids of the SLA, demonstrating a *parallel* low-intensity strategic match by LTTE. Ranasinghe comments on this—“To compensate for its strategic deficiency, the LTTE used its nascent air wing, the Air Tigers, to protect forces across the island and, in addition, heavily used suicide bombers and assassins to wage a deadly low intensity campaign throughout Sri Lanka, targeting key politicians, government officials, military commanders, and critical infrastructure.”²⁴

The political component to the Tamil “insurgency” strategy can be linked to its conventional strategic focus. From its humble beginnings, the LTTE has strived to maintain its self-imposed status as the sole defender of the Tamil-minority population, and the sole fighter for a separate Tamil state under its administration. As Dr. Kristian Stokke noted in his research on LTTE governance capacity and strategy, the “LTTE’s hegemony in Tamil politics is also based on their military capacity to confront the Sri Lankan government and provide a degree of external security, as well as their repressive capacity in regard to internal anti-LTTE political and military forces.”²⁵ The LTTE’s main marker of extending political capacity over controlled areas, in the form of authoritarian, centralized governance, was the efficacy of its battlefield ability and campaign; first came the ability to hold territory, beat back SLA offensives, and extend the security blanket inherent with conventional conflict, and this was viewed the main

²² General Sarath Fonseka, quoted in Ranasinghe, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan...,” 3-4.

²³ Ranasinghe, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan...,” 1-2.

²⁴ Ranasinghe, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan...,” 4.

²⁵ Stokke, Kristian, “Building the Tamil Eelam State: emerging state institutions and forms of governance in LTTE-controlled areas in Sri Lanka,” *Third World Quarterly* (2006): 1026-1027.

avenue to achieve statehood and strategically match SLA tactics and operations. With its political strategy relying on progress made with its military campaign against the SLA, the heavily-kinetic focus of the LTTE should not be viewed as an *absence* of political component; instead, the kinetic operations and strategy *defined* the nature of the political component to the insurgency's grand-strategy. The erosion of popular support for the LTTE was an inevitable political evolution of the conflict in many ways; after all, the LTTE's administrative style consisted of mostly oppressive authoritarian governance aimed at maximizing conventional resources and capabilities for the battlefield is a prescription for population marginalization. The decision of the LTTE to focus on battlefield capabilities and operations, sacrificing a robust political strategy and institution building campaign to gain leverage both with the population and against the GOSL's governance capacity, had a buoying effect on SLA support. This manifested itself in the rapid growth of the military's manpower, particularly the SLA. This effect contributed to the exponential increase in manpower reserves for the Sri Lankan Army, giving the military commanders a far greater force capability to conduct major operations against LTTE forces on the battlefield, which they readily took advantage of by continuing major operations against the conventional LTTE.

General Fonseka: "Earlier we would recruit approximately 3,000 per year, but now [December 2008] we are achieving targets of 3,000 per month. Immediately after Mavil Aru [Operation Watershed] in August 2006, we managed to recruit 6,000 in a single month. In 2007, the total number of recruits was 32,000 and this year [2008] we have already recruited 34,000."²⁶

Ranasinghe continues, expanding on the strategic impact of this increase in manpower. "As a result, in 2007-2008, new offensive formations were raised, including: the 58th Division...in September 2007, the 59th Division in January 2008...In the same period, the Commando Regiment expanded from three to five regiments; the Special Forces Regiment also grew from three to five regiments..."²⁷ These new unit formations are illustrative that the SLA built sufficient operational capacity to "match" the conventionally focused LTTE kinetic strategy, thus perpetuating the concept of **adaptive competitive strategic advantage (ACSA)**. Journalist Somini Sengupta notes that "the government also adopted some guerrilla tactics from the Tamil Tigers, using small groups of troops to penetrate deep into the jungle and assassinate rebel leaders."²⁸ The goal of the SLA in this respect was to maintain and expand conventional assets to address the conventional evolution of the LTTE, while *also* expanding low-intensity capacity to strategically match the LTTE as an insurgency (such as with the aforementioned SIOT training).

The LTTE compensated for this **competitive strategic disadvantage** of conventional capabilities by "reverting" to a reliance and utilization of fundamental guerilla tactics, essentially reverting to an insurgent led movement. Ranasinghe continues:

As the battle shifted to the north-eastern Mullaitivu jungles, the LTTE resorted to desperate delaying tactics that included the use of CS (tear) gas and blasted the Kalmadukulam Tank (reservoir) embankment, releasing torrents of water. It also attempted, but failed, to blow up the Iranamaduru Tank embankment. These delaying tactics, however, could not prevent the army advance, which, by late January 2009,

²⁶ General Sarath Fonseka, quoted in Ranasinghe, "Strategic Analysis of Sri Lanka..." 5.

²⁷ Ranasinghe, "Strategic Analysis of Sri Lanka..." 5.

²⁸ Sengupta, "War's End in Sri Lanka."

had steadily pushed the LTTE into a small area referred to as the “Vanni Pocket”, in the general area surrounding the urban stronghold of PTK.²⁹

These strategic trends of ACSA shows that a exclusively kinetically focused insurgency, or counterinsurgency for that matter, without sufficient particular attention to maintaining an accompanying political strategy that focuses on building governance or institutional capabilities, is at an overall strategic disadvantage. Nonetheless, the opposing force can gain an advantage if it has a competitive strategic advantage in operational capabilities; therefore, a kinetically focused insurgency can be defeated by a superior kinetically focused counterinsurgency.

Not so surprisingly, and as illustrated, the Sri Lankan Defense Forces’ counterinsurgency strategy utilized during ‘Eelam IV’, from about 2006 until May 2009, was also heavily rooted in a kinetic operations-first mentality. The overriding idea was to use military capacity to uproot the army, navy, and air force capabilities of the Tamil Tigers from posing a major threat to GOSL military and governance control throughout the country. Starting in the government-controlled south, the SLA used these non-contested areas as “springboards” to extend their governance control and chip-away at LTTE political-military span-of-power until the whole island was brought back under its administration. In this light, the strategic focus was decided to not be on overcoming political problems associated with winning population-support. Contrarily, the “terrorism” that the LTTE perpetuated in its struggle for autonomy was deemed the principal concept of the insurgency for the SLA to defeat, and not, as in most “traditional” counterinsurgencies, the political control of the LTTE over the subject population. This outlook was adopted by both sides, and the conflict turned into a *strategic competition* for military control.

Galula provides the unending importance of the “primacy of the political over the military power.” A major component to classic population-centric counterinsurgency, Galula states in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*:

Essential though it is, the military action is secondary to the political one, its primary purpose being to afford the political power enough freedom to work safely with the population. The armed forces are but one of the many instruments of the counterinsurgent, and what is better than the political power to harness the non-military instruments, to see that appropriations come at the right time to consolidate the military work, that political and social reforms follow through?³⁰

The major guiding principle of the “Rajapaksa COIN-model” was the critical contribution that unwavering political will, and general political cover, provided as the foundation for the kinetic operations employed by the military. General Fonseka remarked, “It is the political leadership with the commitment of the military that led the battle to success...He [Present Rajapaksa], who believed that terrorism should and could be eliminated, gave priority to go ahead with our military strategies.”³¹ The political component in the ‘Rajapaksa Model of COIN’ emphasized steadfast political will to employ highly kinetic operations as the cornerstone tactic to beat back the LTTE ‘once and for all’; political capital and strategy was not aimed at politically marginalizing the LTTE from its population base. The political component to the

²⁹ Ranasinghe, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan...,” 7.

³⁰ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

³¹ General Sarath Fonseka quoted in Sashikumar, VK, “Fundamentals of Victory Against Terror: Sri Lankan Example,” *Indian Defence Review* (2009): 2.

GOSL Counterinsurgency in Eelam IV supported kinetic operations, and not the other way around. As V. K. Sashikumar continues in his analysis of the Sri Lankan government's counterinsurgency in the *Indian Defence Review*, the remaining political components aimed to provide "complete operational freeform for the security forces" to carry out their operations, and notably absent was any political intervention with the intention to "pull away from complete defeat of the LTTE."³²

Naturally, protecting civilians and limiting military operations against the insurgency within the parameters of protecting human rights are not strategic concerns in any highly-kinetic counterinsurgency with a "military-first" emphasis, much less in the Rajapaksa COIN model. Indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, most notably in the "final assault" on held-out Tiger leadership in the Nanthi Kadal region in northeast Sri Lanka, precipitated an outcry from the international community, and sparked a condemnation of the numerous human rights violations committed by both sides. Yet as central to the political component of the kinetic COIN strategy, President Rajapaksa largely ignored calls from the United Nations, US, Great Britain, and other states to declare a cease-fire on humanitarian grounds, pushing instead to continue the military assault by the 58th Division of the SLA. This "go to hell" attitude, as put by Sashikumar, came because previous humanitarian concerns by the international community were exploited by the LTTE as part of their insurgency political strategy. The Tigers would often use these public outcries to force a cease-fire, allowing time and space to recoup conventional losses and rebuild military resources, often using significant financial support from influential Tamil Diaspora. The Rajapaksa COIN strategy addressed this insurgent political tactic by providing the aforementioned political cover, preventing the progression of the strategic political and military benefits of humanitarian exploitation by the LTTE, and eventually successfully *matching* and *competing* with the nature of the insurgent strategy.

While conventional operational successes accounted for a large part of the eventual defeat of the LTTE, as is the major focus of this study, they cannot account for the entire situational end and should not be viewed in isolation beyond a simple strategic analysis. Major Niel Smith, US Army, continues in *Joint Forces Quarterly* to describe other critical factors that played a large role in the entire defeat of the LTTE. "[Other] critical factors included...significant reductions in LTTE external funding, an improved Sri Lanka Army and Navy, support from China, and fallout from the 2004 Tsunami. The cumulative effect of these changes devastated the rebels' ability to continue the conflict."³³ A major effect was particularly the substantial decrease in funding of the LTTE after the GOSL effectively shut down lines of financial support gained from Tamil Diaspora in Canada, India, Great Britain and elsewhere, as well as from illicit underground smuggling activities. This limited the scope to which expansion of conventional assets, such as the LTTE Air Wing and Sea Forces, could take place, and also decreased the ability of the LTTE to fund governance institutions and services in whatever limited capacity they were operating in insurgent-held areas. Conventional capabilities took a hit, but governance capabilities took an even larger hit, as the threat from SLA advances received increasing attention.

Another key component that contributed to the success of the hyper-kinetic strategy was the control of the media and journalists covering the war. Sashikumar establishes "Regulate Media" as his fourth fundamental in his analysis of the political component to the Rajapaksa

³² Sashikumar, "Fundamentals of Victory Against Terror."

³³ Smith, Niel, "Understanding Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (2010): 44.

COIN strategy. “With just one version of the war available for the media to report, the Sri Lankan government ensured an **unidirectional flow of information** [emphasis mine].”³⁴ This conduct of strategic “kinetic” information operations ensured that information was strictly controlled, international backlash was minimized due to lack of information (and thereby augmenting the political component to the strategy), and to thereby rally the Sinhalese-nationalist base by maximizing the efficacy of propaganda.

Major Niel Smith minimizes and down plays the emphasis on the prevalence of this hyper-kinetic strategy, saying “An examination of Sri Lanka’s victory reveals the LTTE’s collapse was the result of cumulative external and internal forces, not *simply* the employment of ruthless new tactics [emphasis mine].”³⁵ While it is certainly the case that the extensive reliance on heavily-kinetic military operations does not account for the entire explanation for success in the LTTE COIN campaign, again, it can be noted that these other factors were utilized in a way to support the overall kinetic strategy; prime importance was given to demonstrated progress against the LTTE *through* the military as the primary tool. The mere fact that a non-population-centric strategy, in which civilians were routinely killed as collateral damage, succeeded despite defiance of tradition counterinsurgency principles is the central question. Furthermore, the “cumulative internal and external forces” partly compose the nature of the LTTE insurgency, which in-itself dictates the conditions of the strategic competition, the terms of which contribute to the efficacy of any particular COIN strategy.

The Rajapaksa counterinsurgency-model was not a spontaneous development due solely to the internal political pressures of a population tired from years of insurgent warfare. Although this element was significant to its initial development, the Rajapaksa Government’s strategy for defeating the LTTE shows systematic attempts aimed at “matching”, and gaining a strategic advantage to, the LTTE’s kinetic-based insurgency strategy. In essence, the GOSL recognized that the LTTE was attempting to continually gain as much conventional resources, capabilities and leverage as possible in order to develop a “normalized” armed force capacity in administering security in the areas in controlled. To this end, the SLA then used conventional operations to defeat this overarching goal of the insurgency, flexing its conventional superiority in ways that were and would not have been possible in a traditional population-centric counterinsurgency.

Had the LTTE ever focused intensely on maintaining a tight control over the population, prioritizing the creation of political leverage and expanding governance capabilities in order to win the support of the population in question, develop a sense of legitimacy with the population, and marginalize, and generally “out-govern”, the GOSL in these areas of control, the hyper-kinetic “Rajapaksa COIN Strategy” would not have been as effective as it was. A purely-kinetic counterinsurgency strategy is not always the most effective approach to defeat an insurgency founded on and fueled by a political component with a focus on governance and population control; conversely, a purely political strategy with a population-centric approach is not the single *most* effective, and only available, strategy when combating a conventionally-adept insurgency aimed at ‘militarizing and conventionalizing’ the conflict.

As previously stated, the objective of this study is *not* to suggest that a *strictly* “kinetics-on-kinetics strategy” or a “population-focus-on-population-focus strategy” is always the *most*

³⁴ Sashikumar, “Fundamentals of Victory Against Terror.”

³⁵ Smith, “Understanding Sri Lanka’s Defeat...,” 44.

effective path to combating an insurgency—such an insinuation simply demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of counterinsurgency and its amorphous quality. In fact, the opposite effect is the aim of this article—showing that the nature of any particular counterinsurgency campaign is defined by the nature of the counterinsurgent force as well as the insurgent force, and that automatically resorting to any “conventional” strategy to fight an insurgency, whether that be by primarily using kinetic-military force or a population-centric approach, is a fallacy in understanding the variables of counterinsurgency. The nature of this concept is encompassed in a principle which shall be called *adaptive competitive strategic advantage*, and states that a counterinsurgency strategy that adapts to the strategic focus of the insurgency, or forces the insurgency to adapt to the operational focus of the counterinsurgent force and fight on its terms, and gains an advantage in this executing this common strategy has a propensity to succeed in diminishing the capability and momentum of the insurgency.

To the critics who completely write-off the merits of a kinetic approach to counterinsurgency, even when that is the primary focus of the insurgency and when the nature of the counterinsurgent permits such an approach, Sri Lanka demonstrated the opposite with the defeat of the 26-year LTTE in May of 2009. Lionel Beehner concurs, stating in his strategic analysis of Sri Lankan COIN:

...the government’s military strategy deserves to be studied in closer detail, as it process that insurgencies can be won with decisive force. Moreover, it puts the lie to the argument that COIN takes decades, requires non-military solutions, and works best with population-centric campaigns to win over hearts and minds. In some cases, in fact, the *exact opposite* is required.³⁶

Thus, the principle of *adaptive competitive strategic adaptability* was the foundation for the success of Sri Lanka’s kinetic counterinsurgency strategy which eventually defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May of 2009; simply, the LTTE was beat at their own game.

Theoretical Implications: Concluding Thoughts

May of 2009 was a monumental event with a monumental impact on counterinsurgency as a concept, theory, and way of war. The defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stumped many theorists and practitioners of “western” counterinsurgency. As Nitin Gokhale notes, “The Sri Lankan model of fighting insurgency is finding favour with disparate nations for its apparent effectiveness in totally eliminating the internal security threat,” especially “since it did not conform to the well-known and widely practiced counterinsurgency tenets.”³⁷ The strategy, in effect, was the polar opposite of a population-centric approach, the cornerstone of which is diminishing the insurgency to a point where a political solution can be reached. Instead, the Sri Lankans demonstrated that the use of “brute military power backed by resolute political will aimed at crushing the well-entrenched [LTTE] insurgency,” and “the control and some times denial of access to media in the battle-zone”³⁸ could also decisively defeat an insurgency, regardless of the population’s support.

³⁶ Beehner, “What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN,” 6.

³⁷ Gokhale, Nitkin, “Sri Lanka changed the rules in counter-insurgency operations,” *India News*, June 21, 2010.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

This enemy-centric kinetic approach succeeded in large part due to a principle which shall be called *adaptive competitive strategic advantage* (ACSA). Fundamental to ACSA is the concept that the strategic orientation of an insurgency fundamentally dictates the nature of the counterinsurgent/government response, and an effective counterinsurgency approach is one which strategically adapts, and “out-powers,” that of the insurgency. Terrorism and insurgency scholar Bard O’Neill too notes this in *Insurgency and Terrorism*:

Where insurgents adopt other strategies, the strategic orientation of the government will differ correspondingly. The military-focus approach calls for a response that emphasizes the military dimension but does not exclude political, social, and economic measures. **Conventional warfare threats must be countered with conventional forces** [emphasis mine].³⁹

When in conventional counterinsurgency, the population is determined to be the fundamental center of gravity for the entire conflict, it follows that any military action should and would be aimed at supporting the core political aims and component. This traditionally meant that the minimal application of force necessary to politically marginalizing the insurgency from controlling the population, and securing the population while providing a “security bubble” under which political capacity could be built and used, should and would be employed. As Paul Cornish states:

...’kinetic’ [tactics and operations], meaning the aggressive use of firepower, equipment and mobility against an enemy objective—might not in the past have been considered suitable in counterinsurgency operations, where a lower-key military presence and a more limited use of armed force would have been preferred.⁴⁰

Yet Sri Lanka, and the ACSA concept, proves this automatic conclusion to not be universally true; the status of this principle as a “traditional and conventional pillar” of modern counterinsurgency is no longer valid. Cornish continues:

When an insurgent uses traditional military concepts and tactics to improve his position, it is appropriate that the counterinsurgent should be able to respond (or pre-empt) in kind. There can be times when insurgent and counterinsurgent confront each other as if in conventional warfare, and at such a moment it would of course be absurd for the counterinsurgent dogmatically to insist that conventional military practices should not be used, and thus to cede the advantage to the insurgent.⁴¹

Indeed, in situations where the ACSA for the counterinsurgent force warrants it, the value of adopting a kinetic-focused strategy should not be diminished or overly understated. One studying the merits of the Sri Lankan approach for future use should not be fooled into totally discounting the population, on the other hand—in the end, as can be observed today in Sri Lanka, the government must deal with the population it has gained control of from the insurgency, regardless of the means in which it accomplishes this.

³⁹ O’Neill, Bard, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 158.

⁴⁰ Cornish, Paul, “The United States and counterinsurgency: ‘political first, political last, political always,’” *International Affairs* 85: I (2009): 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

An explanation for the strategic evolution of the LTTE into a more conventionally focused and military capable force is actually inherent within the nature of all insurgencies, actually. Galula explains this concept further in “The Insurgency Doctrine”, Chapter 3 of *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, noting that “an insurgency regular army has to be created in order to destroy the counterinsurgent forces.”⁴² This can be interpreted as a natural attempt by the insurgency to gain an ACSA in conventional capability Bard O’Neill states this in *Insurgency and Terrorism*, noting that oftentimes to achieve meaningful success, a conventional force *must* be obtained so that insurgent units can directly confront counterinsurgent units on the battlefield.⁴³ He warns, however, that “the transition to conventional warfare depends on the strategy of the insurgents and their judgments about the vulnerability of the government’s armed forces to conventional attacks.”⁴⁴ Galula too noted this risk for the insurgency in its “conventionalization,” calling it the “problem of timing,” and submitting that “if premature, the creation of this regular army, which necessarily is less elusive than guerilla gangs, may lead to disaster.”⁴⁵

Adaptive competitive strategic advantage encompasses, at its core, the concept that the nature of guerilla warfare is governed by the nature of the counterinsurgent and insurgent force; the application of a highly-kinetic approach to counterinsurgency by Sri Lanka could not be duplicated by the United States or any other comparable nation, even in a matching scenario with a matching insurgency. Corum notes that because modern democracies are “ultimately answerable to the people,”⁴⁶ public support for any counterinsurgency campaign is an essential ingredient for success. Therefore, the adoption of overly-brutal tactics heavily rooted in a kinetic approach is largely inconceivable due to the nature of the counterinsurgent forces of being an ethical, democratic state acting within the parameters of international law and respect for human rights. Or, as Cornish states, “counterinsurgency is not just about ‘their’ politics...but also about ‘ours’.”⁴⁷ The following chart summarizes ACSA in Sri Lanka:

⁴² Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 36.

⁴³ O’Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 36, 56, 154.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁵ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 36.

⁴⁶ Corum, *Bad Strategies*, 20.

⁴⁷ Cornish, “The United States and counterinsurgency,” 66.

Adaptive Competitive Strategic Advantage in the Sri Lankan ‘Eelam IV’ Insurgency

LTTE TACTIC/STRATEGIC FOCUS	GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA A.C.S.A. RESPONSE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Conventionalize” operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase conventional, maneuver operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Became heavily reliant on financial support from Tamil Diaspora 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively cut-off lines of finance from overseas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diminishing availability of operational resources and military equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing military aid and assistance from China and Pakistan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing attempts to resource conventional assets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase conventional assets via military aid from China; cut off naval supply routes for LTTE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LTTE schism with Karuna Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes the Karuna Group in operations against the LTTE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use civilian human shields 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreasing importance of “cause” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize propaganda to solidify support and nationalism; control unidirectional flow of information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use humanitarian concerns and international criticism to rebuild conventional assets and political leverage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore all humanitarian concerns of international community; provide political cover for kinetic military operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing reliance on territory and fixed assets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased strategic use of maneuver warfare and conventional operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revert back to heavy use of subversive, insurgent/guerilla tactics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase training, resourcing and utilization of guerilla warfare, small-unit “insurgent-type” tactics

Adaptive Competitive Strategic Advantage is summarized in Kilcullen's message about the "Struggle to Adapt" in *Counterinsurgency*. In it, he notes that "...counterinsurgency is at heart an adaptation battle: a struggle to rapidly develop and learn new techniques and apply them in a fast-moving, high-threat environment, bringing them to bear before the enemy can evolve in a response, and rapidly changing them as the environment shifts." More directly noted, "Counterinsurgency is, simply, whatever governments do to defeat rebellions."⁴⁸ Sri Lanka's kinetic approach to COIN is counterintuitive to the classic population-centric approach being applied in most insurgent situations today, most prominently by NATO in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is emblematic of the inherent quality of counterinsurgency called ACSA. This is further highlighted in the counterinsurgency campaigns of Russia in Chechnya, Pakistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and elsewhere. Any particular rebellion, and thus the most effective response to it, is defined by the nature of the insurgent, counterinsurgent, and physical and non-physical environment. To gain the advantage, the counterinsurgent force merely needs to adapt to the nature and strategic focus of the insurgency (or force the insurgency to adapt to its strategic focus), capture and shift the momentum of the conflict in its favor, and eventually defeat the rebellion strategically. Dr. Thomas Marks notes the difficulty of this in "Regaining the Initiative":

Strategically, adaptation to insurgent challenges invariably proves difficult. Not only must the precise nature of the threat be discerned, but adaptation must occur even as the conflict develops. Too often, focus is upon immediate, tactical quick-fixes rather than reform realized through correct strategy and operational art.⁴⁹

More simply, an effective COIN strategy can indeed be kinetic in nature, if the counterinsurgent forces: Competitively Adapts, gains a Strategic Advantage, and uses this leverage to defeat the insurgency. The success of Sri Lanka's heavily kinetic counterinsurgency doesn't invalidate conventional thinking on population-centric COIN; instead, it illustrates the heart of the principle common to all counterinsurgencies. In this regard, Adaptive Competitive Strategic Advantage was ever-present in May 2009 when 'the killer tiger roared.'

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⁴⁸ Kilcullen, David, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴⁹ Marks, Thomas, "Regaining The Initiative: Columbia versus the Farc Insurgency," eds. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2008): 209.

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