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What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN

by Lionel Beehner

It has become a truism to say there are no military solutions to defeat an insurgency. That was the thrust of the U.S. military's 2006 counterinsurgency (COIN) manual as well as the mantras repeated by CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus, the manual's coauthor, and his "warrior intellectual" offspring. Conventional wisdom also holds that COIN takes years, if not decades, to complete and emphasizes a population-centric strategy to avoid civilian casualties and win locals' hearts and minds.

But Sri Lanka's successful victory one year ago stands all this conventional wisdom on its head. It was brute military force, not political dialogue or population control, which ended its brutal decades-long war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers, a separatist group perhaps most notorious for popularizing the suicide bomb. The final military campaign lasted months, not years or decades. It was a gruesome finale, to be sure. The Sri Lankan government paid little heed to outside calls for preventing collateral damage. While humanitarian workers and journalists were barred from entering the war zone, as many as 20,000 civilians were killed in the crossfire and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Tamils were corralled into camps after war ended¹. It was, as one journalist I spoke to in Colombo put it, "a war without witnesses." Hearts and minds took a backseat to shock and awe.

Still, the lesson from Sri Lanka's COIN experiment is that overwhelming force *can* defeat insurgents, terrorists and other irregular armed groups in relatively short order, but at a steep cost. Its model disproves the notion that counterinsurgencies must be drawn-out, Vietnam-like campaigns. With U.S. forces bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, it also provides states fighting small wars with a different counterinsurgency template. Not without reason did Pakistan and Thailand, which both face insurgencies on their peripheries, seek out Sri Lanka for military training and advice in recent months.

So do America's warrior intellectuals and COIN theorists have it all backwards? Should we be emphasizing military solutions over political compromises and accommodation, overwhelming force over clear-hold-and-build campaigns, defeating the enemy over winning locals' "hearts and minds"? Does Sri Lanka's COIN strategy provide any lessons for Washington as it escalates the war in Afghanistan, or for other countries facing violent insurgencies along their unruly peripheries?

Or does the fallout from the use of massive force—the high death toll, the lost hearts and minds, the accusations of war crimes, the unresolved grievances of ethnic minorities—negate whatever victory is achieved on the battlefield or goodwill that comes from a peaceful

¹ The Sunday Times, "The Hidden Massacre," May 29, 2009
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6383449.ece>

settlement? It is a perplexing question for military strategists. “The end of the Sri Lankan civil war,” wrote Robert Haddick, a managing editor at the Small Wars Journal, “most especially the way it ended, with a clear military solution – will cause many sleepless nights for Western counterinsurgency theorists.”²

A Tiger Grows

The war left this tear-dropped shaped tropical island of 22 million devastated and in perpetual military lockdown mode. Fishermen missing limbs still limp along the harbor of Trincomalee, a port in the northeast. An estimated 80,000 people perished during the quarter-century conflict, including an Indian prime minister (Rajiv Gandhi, felled by a female suicide bomber in 1991) and countless Sri Lankan politicians.³ Several attempts by outside powers to mediate ceasefires proved fruitless. The intervention of Indian peacekeepers in the late 1980s backfired as well (and tilted New Delhi against the Tigers). Even Mother Nature was unable to bring the warring sides together: The brief *détente* after the 2004 tsunami wiped out entire swaths of the coastline never stuck.

The war began, as many civil conflicts do, over an aggrieved minority’s demand for greater rights. After its independence in 1948, the Sinhalese majority resented that the British colonialists had given minority Tamils, most of them scattered across the north, preferential treatment and higher-paying jobs. That bred ethnic nationalism and discriminatory practices, which fed into Tamil desires for self-rule. The Tamils, comprising roughly 20 percent of Sri Lanka’s population, are mostly Hindu (there are also some Christians and Muslims), while the majority Sinhalese are Buddhist. Because of a 1956 “Sinhala only” rule to replace English as the island’s official language, schools became increasingly segregated, as Tamils who did not speak Sinhalese were denied civil service jobs and access to universities, keeping them permanently marginalized.⁴ Resentment built up, and in 1975, a rosy-cheeked young Tamil named Velupillai Prabhakaran allegedly shot the mayor of Jaffna, a city up north, at point-blank range.⁵ That set the tone for what was to follow: A long drive for Tamil self-rule that would be achieved through violence, not dialogue or diplomacy.

The next year, Prabhakaran formed the group that would later become the LTTE, launching a war that was as relentless as it was ruthless. The group pioneered the use of suicide bombers, including the enlistment of female “Black Tigers,” to terrorize civilian populations.⁶ It carried out targeted assassinations against political leaders, filled its own military rank and file with child soldiers, and used human shields. At its height, the Tigers controlled a 10,000-square-mile swath of territory. It was flush with cash, thanks to a rich and powerful Tamil Diaspora that spanned several continents, not to mention the LTTE’s mafia-style ability to extort protection money from Tamil businesses. The group engaged in lucrative human and narcotics smuggling on the side. “They have billions of dollars,” a former governor of Sri Lanka’s central bank, told me. “For \$50,000, they could get everything from arms to humans. Terrorism is a business.” Their cells across the globe had access to pricey lobbyists, lawyers, and public relations firms.

² Westhawk Blog, May 2009 <http://westhawk.blogspot.com/2009/05/did-sri-lanka-debunk-counterinsurgency.html>

³ BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8062922.stm

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546059/Sinhala-Only-Bill>

⁵ Hindustan Times, April 22, 2009: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Profile-of-Velupillai-Prabhakaran/Article1-402963.aspx>

⁶ BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2516263.stm

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, as evidenced by the air raid in March 2007 against an airbase outside Colombo. “That was our mini-9/11,” Murali Reddy, a Colombo-based correspondent for *The Hindu*, told me. The attack served as a wakeup call for the government that the LTTE was not some ragtag band of religious fanatics, but capable and willing to terrorize its population by land, sea, and air. To dislodge the threat, the government decided, would require overwhelming force.⁷

The Brothers Rajapaksa

Enter Mahinda Rajapaksa, a Buddhist lawyer-turned-politician. He came to power in 2005 by promising to win once and for all the war against the Tamil Tigers (Ironically, he was elected partly because the Tigers urged Tamils to boycott the vote).⁸ His smiling visage, clad in a traditional white tunic and red sash, is plastered across the country. At a time when talking up the need for political solutions to insurgencies was just coming into vogue in Western capitals, Rajapaksa preached just the opposite. He boldly declared that only a military solution would end the violence, not political accommodation. It was a posture that put him at odds with the West. Even still, Rajapaksa cast the Tamil conflict as part of the larger “war on terror.” That was partly a political move to help shield him from outside criticism for the overwhelming force he was about to employ – then-Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke in similar terms to describe his scorched-earth campaign against Chechen separatist rebels in the early 2000s– yet also a shrewd way to internationalize the conflict (the Europeans and Americans both eventually slapped the Tigers on their terrorist lists, which limited their ability to funnel aid from overseas). When faced with outside criticism, Rajapaksa played the “neo-colonialism” card, while criticizing the West for hypocrisy, given the civilian carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan (although his argument is unfair, seeing how the hundreds of Afghans killed as collateral damage does not compare to the tens of thousands of Tamils killed or held in camps).⁹ Until Rajapaksa took office, the government had employed a variety of applications of military force against the Tamil Tigers, to no avail. “The government forces continue to fight an unconventional war in a conventional mode,” wrote Rohan Gunaratna, author of *Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency*, back in 2001. “Government bureaucracies, unlike transnational terrorist networks, are not administratively or operationally flexible, to engage and interlock new threats.”¹⁰

The application of military force in a place like Sri Lanka is obviously much different from the application of force in, say, the mountainous hideaways of Afghanistan or the desert sands of Iraq. It is far more difficult for insurgents to slip unnoticed into a neighboring country when surrounded by sea. Likewise, it is much easier for militaries to squeeze insurgents onto a tiny swath of land. Still, the Sri Lankan model holds important lessons for Washington, as it ramps up its own counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

⁷ Rohan Gunaratna, *Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency* (2001).

⁸ Business Week: <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-01-26/rajapaksa-leads-sri-lanka-vote-as-fonseka-candidacy-challenged.html>

⁹ Times of India, May 28, 2010: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Sri-Lankan-President-Rajapaksa-rejects-demands-for-probe-into-rights-violation/articleshow/5984931.cms>

¹⁰ Gunaratna.

To win the war, President Rajapaksa, along with his brother Gotabhaya, who was appointed defense secretary, took a number of important steps. They overhauled Sri Lanka's intelligence system and clamped down on the financial activity of Tamils living overseas. They beefed up the ranks of the army. For most of the conflict, the military's recruitment rate was about 3,000 per year. By December 2008, that number had spiked to 3,000 *per month*.¹¹ It was also the way in which the military deployed its forces. It fought like its enemy, emphasizing smaller units of four-or-eight-man teams that operated as de facto commando squads. These irregular army units, backed by air support, were more mobile, more flexible. They were able to infiltrate Tiger strongholds and assassinate rebel leaders. "We were a conventional army fighting with a guerilla," the government's defense spokesperson, Keheliya Rambukwella, said last year, "and in some form our army was converted to a guerilla [army] to...fight the LTTE."¹²

Unlike conventional COIN doctrine – which emphasizes "clear-hold-and-build" operations aimed at seizing land by means of moving soldiers onto streets, gathering intelligence, winning over locals (by providing basic services and security), and reclaiming areas block-by-block – capturing territory was of secondary importance to the Sri Lankan government. More important was maintaining momentum by continually launching offensive operations aimed at killing LTTE commanders to rob the insurgency of its manpower and material resources. In 2006, for example, roughly 1,700 rebels were killed, according to the government. By 2009, that figure exceeded 7,000.¹³

Sri Lanka also relied on a shrewd divide-and-conquer strategy, not unlike the one proposed to defeat the Afghan Taliban. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has spoken about the need to "peel off those [Taliban] who are willing to renounce violence"—that is, those in it for the money, not for ideological reasons—and effectively flip them over to the Americans' side.¹⁴ Similarly, the Sri Lankan government was successful at exploiting fissures within the LTTE leadership. The government backed these splinter movements with military force and money, which allowed the military to reclaim formal Tiger strongholds in the eastern province. If politics makes strange bedfellows, civil war makes for even stranger ones. A LTTE commander who later defected and goes by the nom de guerre Karuna later became Rajapaksa's minister of national integration.

The Karuna wing numbered around 5,000 fighters and splintered from the LTTE, among other reasons, over complaints that the grievances of eastern Tamils were ignored.¹⁵ That prompted the LTTE, most of whose leadership came from the northern areas around Jaffna, to question the loyalty of Tamils from the east. They were unfamiliar with the supply routes and local terrain. The bumpy road linking Trincomalee in the east with the hill country of the middle of the island, once lined with dense jungle heavily saturated with Tiger snipers, was cleared of brush for hundreds of yards to allow military convoys to safely traverse the corridor. Robbed of manpower and material resources, the LTTE stepped up its conscription of child soldiers to fill in

¹¹ Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan Military's Counter-Insurgency Operations (February 12, 2010): www.futuredirections.org.au/.../1266992558-FDIStrategicAnalysisPaper-12February2010.pdf

¹² International News Services, May 2009: <http://www.internationalnewsservices.com/articles/1-latest-news/11731-sri-lankas-victory-over-rebels-may-inform-counter-insurgency-worldwide>

¹³ DeSilva-Ranasinghe.

¹⁴ NPR January 29, 2010: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123098927>

¹⁵ Dr. S. Chandrasekharan, South Asia Analysis Group (October 30, 2004): <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/notes3/note245.html>

the gaps, turning locals increasingly against the Tigers. “The soldiers were so small, their rifle butts were touching the ground,” a Tamil restaurant owner in Trincomalee, a busy port in the eastern province, told me, shaking his head. “We had hope in the beginning. But they let us down.”¹⁶ The Tiger leadership, suspecting easterners of being Karuna loyalists, in turn began targeting the local population. Dozens were killed or tortured. Shops were destroyed. A parallel could be drawn to Iraq in 2007, and how al-Qaeda in Iraq overreached when it targeted Iraqi Sunnis in Anbar Province, which ultimately gave rise to the Sunni Awakening and the U.S. military’s clever plan to pit Sunni insurgents against the foreign terrorists there.

The war required enormous political will (some might call it hard-headedness) on the part of President Rajapaksa. Throughout the conflict, he met little resistance from parliament. Unlike in operations past – whenever violence reached a crescendo, the government would be pressured to pull back by the international community and hold peace talks – during the final phase of the war, Rajapaksa ignored outside calls to let up. He restricted access to the war zone, barring humanitarian workers and journalists. Under a dubious antiterrorism law, some human rights organizations were branded as sympathizers with the Tigers and independent journalists were targeted on occasion (perhaps most brazenly was the unsolved January 2009 assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge, a newspaper editor and outspoken critic of the regime).¹⁷

The government also stepped up cooperation with its neighbors. Colombo relied on intelligence from India and satellite imagery from the United States to pinpoint and intercept vessels ferrying arms to the Tigers up north. Colombo also received dollops of military and economic aid from China, which has a vested interest in the waterway and ports along the island’s southern periphery that are convenient for shipping purposes.

By early 2009, with the LTTE’s navy and airpower neutralized and its command-and-control capabilities in tatters, the military had effectively garrisoned off the northern and eastern sections of the island, while squeezing what remained of the Tiger leadership onto a tiny swath of coastline the size of Central Park (The final phase of the war began in earnest in January 2008, when Rajapaksa formally abrogated a 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE).¹⁸ As the “final assault” began, tens of thousands of homeless Tamil civilians found themselves trapped in the no-fire “safe zone” and attempted to flee. Thousands perished, according to UN estimates. The Tigers believed the international community—namely Britain, the United States, or India—would step in either militarily or diplomatically to pressure the government to back off, neither of which happened (The Tigers had antagonized many of their Indian sympathizers after assassinating Rajiv Gandhi in 1991). Cornered, many of them committed suicide by swallowing the cyanide poison capsules they kept around their necks to avoid capture. In late May, the charred corpse of Prakharian, his wide almond eyes staring blankly into space, was found in a lagoon and then paraded before a jubilant television audience.¹⁹ The war was declared over.

¹⁶ Lionel Beehner: “What Does It Look Like To Win A War On Terror?” Slate (November 3, 2009): <http://www.slate.com/id/2234459>

¹⁷ Time Magazine (January 8, 2009): <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1870440,00.html>

¹⁸ Robert Tempier: “Day of Reckoning in Sri Lanka” Foreign Policy (April 20, 2009): <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/day-of-reckoning-in-sri-lanka.aspx>.

¹⁹ New York Times (May 18, 2009). http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/19/world/asia/19lanka.html?_r=1&ref=liberation_tigers_of_tamil_eelam

Lessons Learned?

The Sri Lanka model of counterinsurgency – while neither entirely replicable nor recommended in places like Afghanistan or Iraq, given the variations in the enemy and terrain (squeezing the enemy is much easier on an island than an impenetrable patchwork of mountains) and the humanitarian catastrophe that followed – does hold some important lessons for U.S. foreign policy. Yes, Sri Lanka's victory was messy and morally suspect, what with the civilian carnage, the internment camps, and the accusations of war crimes. For a democracy like Sri Lanka to make zero distinction between innocent civilians and armed combatants is morally repugnant, and the government should allow for an independent Gaza-style investigation into alleged war crimes, empty its internment camps, and lift restrictions on journalists and human rights organizations.

Yet to say as Robert Kaplan and other military analysts have, that “there are no useful pointers to be gleaned from the Sri Lankan government's victory” makes little sense, too.²⁰ Sri Lanka, like Chechnya, represents one extreme end of the spectrum on the use of force. The jury is obviously still out on whether it was successful or not in the long run, since much will depend on the government's ability to integrate its Tamil minorities and reach some kind of national reconciliation (the ugliness of the recent presidential election is also not a good harbinger for Sri Lanka's democratic future). That said, the government's military strategy deserves to be studied in closer detail, as it proves 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. As Paul Staniland of the University of Chicago and other analysts have noted, winning hearts and minds is sometimes antithetical to effective state building. “[S]tate-building is characterized historically by relentless coercion, social homogenization, and center-periphery conflict,” Staniland wrote in *Foreign Policy*.²¹ The imperatives of creating strong governments and of ‘winning hearts and minds’ can directly clash with one another.”

Coercion does not mean tossing hundreds of thousands of internally displaced civilians into internment camps, silencing the media, turning a deaf ear to calls for war crimes investigations, or rolling back democracy, as the Sri Lankan government did in the wake of its war victory. But it is a tacit acknowledgement that conflicts between states and non-state actors, by their very nature, are morally ambiguous and raise difficult cost-benefit conundrums. Would decades of continued fighting and the steady drip-drip-drip of violence have claimed more lives in the long run than a sweeping victory achieved by heavy-handed means? (Israel and Turkey have used a similar rationale to justify their use of disproportionate force – sustained aerial bombardments, raids in “hot pursuit” of militants, the use of cluster bombs – against Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party.) Would the escalating cost of the war – which was setting the government back on average about \$4 million per day – have bankrupted Sri Lanka's economy? As horrific as the final operation was, nowadays Sri Lankans no longer are afraid to board a bus or commuter train as before. Life, despite the checkpoints and nearby camps, has resumed some semblance of normalcy in Jaffna and Trincomalee.

²⁰ Robert Kaplan, “To Catch a Tiger,” *Atlantic Monthly*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/07/to-catch-a-tiger/7581/>

²¹ Paul Staniland, “Counterinsurgency is a Bloody, Costly Business,” *Foreign Policy* (November 24, 2009), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/24/counterinsurgency_is_a_bloody_costly_business

So what lessons does Sri Lanka hold for U.S. foreign policy? With the United States embroiled in its fight against Taliban insurgents in the depths of Afghanistan, it would be wise to incorporate at least parts of the playbook Sri Lanka used to defeat the LTTE. Its ability to flip factions within the Tigers, its emphasis on targeting the top tiers of the LTTE leadership, and its overhaul of how troops are deployed on the ground all borrowed from classical COIN doctrine, even as the government downplayed the need to avoid collateral damage and “clear, hold and build” territory. COIN theorists are finally starting to come around to this theory. “The strength of a terrorist adversary, al-Qaeda or any other, does not correlate with control of a piece of territory in Afghanistan or elsewhere,” wrote Paul Pillar, a former national intelligence officer, in *The National Interest*. “If a terrorist group has a physical safe haven available, it will use it. But of all the assets that make a group a threat—including ideological appeal and a supply of already-radicalized recruits—occupation of acreage is one of the least important.”²²

Sri Lanka demonstrates that not just targeted killings or a “surge” of forces is sufficient to win the war. A more effective approach is one that combines Special Forces operations, a divide-and-conquer strategy, and sustained aerial assaults. The Sri Lankan approach deemphasizes the need for winning hearts and minds and underscores the need for applying coercion and a monopolization on the use of force. The U.S. military, given the constraints it faces and wariness of the war back home, suffers from the Goldilocks paradox: It applies just enough force to upset the locals and kill civilians, yet not enough to actually dislodge the threat and win the war. The result is a worst-of-both-worlds scenario: An angry populace and an entrenched non-state actor. If governments are unwilling to deploy sufficient force to fight insurgents because it will undermine their democratic values, then a better model to follow is not a middle-road solution but rather one that relies on minimal force, a smaller military footprint, and scaled-back expectations, combined with stepped-up policing and intelligence-sharing (think Spain’s handling of its ETA insurgency). Or as the COIN manual puts it: “Sometimes doing *nothing* is the best policy.” [Emphasis mine]

To be sure, Sri Lanka faces enormous challenges, from political infighting to rebuilding the island’s war-ravaged infrastructure to resolving the pending humanitarian crisis up north. But it is an infinitesimally improved situation from a few years back, when locals were afraid to even board a bus or commuter train for fear it would be blown up by an LTTE suicide bomber. The downtown market in Trincomalee, once emptied of its customers, is not bustling with activity – as are the local lumberyards, given the coastline’s construction boom. Foreign investors, developers, and tourists are trickling back to the areas south of Colombo. That said, the root causes of the war—ethnic discrimination against Tamils, economic and political marginalization—remain unaddressed (not to mention that a rich and vocal Tamil Diaspora, embittered by the government's handling of the war, still lobbies forcefully from abroad for Tamil rights), causing some to suspect the LTTE may someday resume their fight another day.

In small wars, the non-state actor need not win the war on the battlefield, but can declare victory by simply prolonging the conflict indefinitely and exhausting the state. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE’s apparent strategy was to win the war by *simply not losing it* and dragging the conflict out indefinitely, while continuing to enrich itself on handouts from Tamils abroad. The notion that the war could have been won by political accommodation, given the government’s repeated

²² Paul Pillar, “Is Afghanistan the Right War?” *The National Interest* (March 2010): <http://nationalinterest.org/greatdebate/debating-afghanistan/afghanistan-war-pillar-3796?page=1>

efforts at good-faith negotiations, seems like a fantasy. Moreover, the idea that military force is too blunt an instrument to wield against non-state actors, given the dangers of turning locals against the state, has been shaped by U.S. mishaps in Iraq and Afghanistan, even though the evidence elsewhere paints a different picture. As Seth Jones of RAND and others have noted, military force – although only successful seven percent of the time – tends to be *most* effective against groups that are “large, well-armed, and well-organized.”²³ Indeed, the lesson learned from Sri Lanka is that to win a war against a determined enemy like the Taliban or Tamil Tigers, overwhelming force is preferable to underwhelming force.

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²³ “How Terrorist Groups End” Seth Jones, Rand (2008) (www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741-1.sum.pdf).