In 2009, after 30 years of conflict, the government of Sri Lanka declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the most innovative and resilient insurgent organisations in modern history. They had maintained an armed separatist movement for nearly 30 years, and from the late 1990s onwards had run a de facto separatist state of ‘Tamil Eelam’ in the northeast of the island. Government attempts to defeat the LTTE through counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s had failed, but a two-year military offensive in 2007–9 completely routed the group, and called the government to regain control over the whole of the island.

This remarkable outcome led some to examine the ‘Sri Lankan model’ of counterinsurgency as a possible export to deal with other ongoing insurgencies in South Asia and elsewhere. On closer inspection, however, the example of Sri Lanka raises significant problems and challenges. In military terms, government tactics were often very effective, but may not always be replicable in other situations, where insurgent groups have not developed a nascent state apparatus, or where they still have a deep hinterland or third-party support. More significantly, the campaign was accompanied by reliable allegations of widespread and serious war crimes during the fighting, resulting in international censure of the government, and continuing grievances and resentment among many of the minority Tamil community. In addition, the counterinsurgency had a very negative impact on the country’s domestic political system, undermining political pluralism and civil liberties, and contributing to the emergence of an increasingly authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, it is a case study that offers potentially significant lessons for counterinsurgency in the twenty-first century, not least in its open challenge to the more population-centric doctrines developed by Western COIN experts.

**Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Sri Lanka: historical overview**

The roots of Sri Lanka’s conflicts are highly contested, but date back at least to the late British colonial period, when competition between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil groups became more acute in the run-up to independence in 1948. Resentment among Sinhalese at apparent over-representation of Tamils in the civil service and in the professions led to legislation (such as the 1956 Sinhala-only act, which promoted the Sinhalese language) that limited minority rights. Tamil opposition to such moves was initially expressed through peaceful
Counterinsurgency in Sri Lanka

demonstrations, strikes and political campaigns, but in the early 1970s Tamil youth began to develop more militant tactics. In 1976 Velupillai Prabhakaran, a young radical from the north of Sri Lanka, founded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At the time, it was just one among many radical, Tamil nationalist groups, but it slowly emerged as the most powerful advocate of Tamil secessionism, both through clever political manoeuvring and by ruthlessly eliminating its rivals.

Figure 25.1 Sri Lanka (© United Nations).

313
Full-scale war first broke out in 1983, following an LTTE attack on an army convoy in Jaffna and subsequent mass anti-Tamil riots in Colombo. These events initiated what was subsequently termed Eelam War I (1983–7), a brutal conflict which only ended with the intervention of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in 1987. The intervention, however, was a disaster: instead of acting as a peacekeeping force, the IPKF became embroiled in a counterinsurgency campaign against the LTTE, which refused to disarm. (See also Chapter 24 in this volume.) The failure of the IPKF to disarm the LTTE led to Indian withdrawal from Sri Lanka in 1990, and continues to have an impact on official thinking in Delhi about involvement in military interventions overseas. The LTTE, on the other hand, emerged from the IPKF period significantly strengthened, both psychologically, having taken on the Indian army and effectively won, and materially, having gained significant military resources during the conflict with the IPKF.

During the IPKF period, government forces had been fighting a second insurgency, led by a leftist group in the south of the country, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which combined Maoism and virulent Sinhalese nationalism in an unlikely ideological cocktail. The JVP had led a militant uprising in 1971, and then a more serious campaign in 1987–90, in which many officials and military officers were assassinated. This latter insurgency was crushed brutally by the government, involving mass abuses of human rights, severe restrictions on civil liberties and the widespread use of extrajudicial methods. Many of the lessons of this apparently successful counterinsurgency campaign appear to have inspired elements of the campaign against the Tigers after 2006.

Fighting broke out again between the LTTE and government forces in July 1990, after the failure of peace talks, and following a series of massacres and expulsions committed by the LTTE, particularly targeting Muslim residents in the north and east of the island. During Eelam War II (1990–5) massacres and atrocities were committed by both sides. The LTTE had by now developed the capability to engage in significant military confrontations with the much larger Sri Lankan army, such as the battle of Elephant Pass in 1991, when 5,000 LTTE fighters laid siege for a month to a Sri Lankan army base. Government offensives in 1992 might have defeated the LTTE, but they were again forestalled by Indian diplomatic intervention. Gradually, the LTTE began to take control of territory in the north and was developing parallel state structures in those areas it controlled.

A short-lived ceasefire in 1995, brokered under new president Chandrika Kumaratunga, was broken by the LTTE in April, and led to Kumaratunga’s so-called ‘war for peace’ (Eelam War III), a major military offensive against the LTTE, which led to the government retaking control of Jaffna after heavy fighting for the first time in a decade. However, subsequent military campaigns were repulsed by the LTTE, which also carried out a series of devastating terrorist attacks in civilian areas in the south, using suicide bombers, the so-called ‘Black Tigers’. These had first been used in 1987, but in the mid 1990s they became a central tactic in the LTTE’s military campaign. The most audacious LTTE attack came in 2001, when a commando raid on the country’s only international airport destroyed 12 planes. The airport attack left the government demoralised, and helped open the way to peace talks brokered by Norway.

The failure of the counterinsurgency against the LTTE in the 1980s and 1990s was partially the result of poor military strategy, an often corrupt and poorly managed procurement system, and inadequate training. However, successive governments also felt significant international pressure during military campaigns. In both 1987 and 1992 Indian diplomatic and military intervention forced the Sri Lankan government to halt potentially successful offensives against the LTTE. Support for the LTTE in Tamil Nadu in India was an important factor in the politics of the military campaign, and it was augmented by a large Tamil diaspora in Western Europe, Canada and Australia, who ran an extensive fundraising campaign for the LTTE and put often
vocal pressure on Western politicians. These experiences informed the post-2006 campaign, when there was a strong rejection of international pressure on the government to limit its military offensive.

**The new regime**

The peace process (2002–6) failed for multiple reasons, including problems with the design of the process itself (ICG 2006), but its failure was accelerated by a change of president in late 2005, when Mahinda Rajapakse was elected with support from the extreme nationalist JVP, and also as a result of an LTTE-imposed boycott of the election by Tamils. The new president’s scepticism about the peace process was well known, and his new team, which included his two brothers, Gotobaya (as Minister of Defence) and Basil (as political adviser), began planning a possible military response to the LTTE, although there is no evidence that they had a genuine plan for an extensive military campaign before they came to office.

In 2005 few observers believed that the situation could be resolved only by military means: previous government offensives had demonstrated serious problems in the Sri Lankan military, including corruption, lack of discipline and high levels of desertion. By contrast, the LTTE were highly disciplined, with almost legendary skills in commando operations, and a growing capacity to carry out conventional military warfare on land and sea. By 2003 the LTTE had developed a de facto state, Tamil Eelam, which had exclusive control of 15,000 sq km of territory in the north and east of Sri Lanka; in the north, the government only controlled Jaffna, which was cut off from the south of the island, and had to be resupplied by air and sea. This proto-state had its own state services, including police, welfare and other bodies, and a full range of military capabilities, including both traditional military capacity, heavy weaponry and some sea-going capability, and non-traditional units, including suicide squads. Often these capabilities were mixed, with small boats designed for use in suicide missions against larger Sri Lankan naval vessels, for example. A small air force became apparent in during Eelam War IV, but consisted only of a small number of Cessna light aircraft.

Arguably, the peace process, far from strengthening the LTTE as many of its opponents argued, had made the LTTE complacent, forcing it to focus on state-building and political and administrative tasks at the expense of the military. Above all, the peace process probably played a role in undermining the LTTE’s unity. In 2003 the group suffered an extremely damaging split, with the defection of a key commander from Eastern Province, Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, generally known by his nom de guerre of Col. Karuna. The reasons for the split were disputed, but probably combined personal and political issues, accentuated by a traditional, regional divide between eastern and northern Tamils. However, the defection of Karuna seriously weakened LTTE control of Eastern Province (where there was also a large Muslim population, many of them opposed to the LTTE). Not surprisingly, it was in the east that the first successes of the government emerged.

**Renewal of conflict: Eastern Province**

Although there were increasing skirmishes between the two sides in 2005–6, the beginning of Eelam War IV is usually dated to July–August 2006, when the government launched what it termed a ‘humanitarian operation’ to take control of sluice gates at Mavil Aru, which had been closed by the LTTE, cutting off water supplies to farmers. This event gave the government a useful justification for a major assault on key strategic LTTE positions on the east coast, most importantly retaking control of Sampur, from which the LTTE had been able to use artillery
against the strategically vital port at Trincomalee. The resumption of control over Sampur involved retaking territory from the LTTE for the first time since the 1990s. Although neither side abrogated the ceasefire and peace talks were held in October 2006, in reality the battle for control of Eastern Province had begun.

The government had significant advantages in the east: the demographics were in its favour, with a large Muslim population, which was equally suspicious of both Karuna and LTTE Tamil militias, interspersed among Tamils along the heavily populated coastal strip. The defection of Karuna made it relatively easy to take control of Batticaloa, his main political base, and gradually during late 2006 government forces, primarily the paramilitary police charged with counter-terrorist actions, the Special Task Force (STF), asserted control of major roads and towns along the coast. An important battle was for control of Vakarai, a strategic point that linked the LTTE in the east with their northern territories, which was retaken by government troops in January 2007.

LTTE bases in the east remained in the interior, in remote areas away from the major cities of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. The military and STF, together with Karuna militias, combined a variety of methods to cut them off from supply routes and to hunt them down inside the region. First, they used both pressure and physical attacks to eliminate many LTTE sympathisers or supporters who acted as conduits with the major cities. These attacks on individuals and groups involved in the supply route for the interior were often carried out by Karuna militia, acting outside the law, and with impunity. Karuna bases began to appear in government-controlled areas, often located close to the military or next to STF bases. These proxy forces were initially useful to the military in the east, since they often knew LTTE sympathisers personally or at least had the local language and cultural skills to find out the key actors in the LTTE support network. However, the human rights abuses committed by Karuna also attracted increased international attention and pressure on the government, and reduced any genuine support among ethnic Tamils.

Attacks on LTTE sympathisers also began to undermine LTTE extortion networks, cutting off important local sources of funding for the LTTE, and instead channelling funding to pro-government militias. A similar pattern could be observed in recruitment, with many young Tamils (including children) being recruited by the Karuna group, denying the LTTE an important source of military personnel. However, outside Sri Lanka there was also increased pressure on LTTE funding, with Western governments generally combining some criticism of the government for its renewed military campaign with an effort to cut down on LTTE fundraising in their countries, much of which seemed to increasingly represent extortion rackets.

In early 2007 the STF launched attacks on LTTE bases in Thopigalla and Kanchikudichcharu, and cleared the LTTE presence in Ampara district. Once the LTTE was restricted to the interior in the east, they appear to have made the decision to effectively withdraw their remaining forces, and concentrate on the northern front. Any other decision would have left them over-extended in the east with unreliable supply lines, serving no useful strategic purpose; since much of the fighting was carried out by the STF and Karuna group, the LTTE presence in the east was not diverting significant military resources from other fronts.

The northern front

The heartland of the LTTE was in the Vanni, a broad swathe of the Northern Province south of the Jaffna peninsula, much of it covered in dense forest. The ‘Vanni operation’ targeting LTTE positions in the north had begun rather tentatively in March 2007, while fighting still continued in the east. During 2007 a frequently murky war of attrition gradually gathered momentum on the
northern front, with increased activity by Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRPs) across the front, followed by conventional attacks on LTTE positions on the A9 road to Jaffna, and in the northwest regions up to Mannar. For several months fairly conventional modes of attack and counter-attack continued around a series of small villages in the Vavunia area. At first it appeared that the LTTE could hold these positions indefinitely: during 2007 the government made no significant gains in the north, and the LTTE made several powerful counter-attacks against government positions. However, the loss of the Eastern Province – which was an important source of recruitment for the LTTE – and the increasing intercepts of shipping and funding streams, weakened the depth of the LTTE’s fighting capability, and during 2008 government forces began to make significant gains, and force the LTTE further into the interior.

Feeling increasingly confident, the government finally abrogated the largely fictional 2002 ceasefire in January 2008, and the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (a group of Scandinavian observers monitoring the ceasefire) closed on 16 January, leaving the government in full control of information emerging from the battlefield. The fighting caused significant casualties on both sides, with considerable resistance from the LTTE at certain points, where they decided to make a stand, but gradually the significant superiority of the army in numbers and materiel pushed the LTTE back from their forward positions in the Vanni. The army significantly increased its recruitment following early successes in the east, and also managed to cut a previously high level of desertion.

The government strategy was designed to retake coastal areas in the northwest, cutting the LTTE off from another key supply route from India, and linking up government forces in Jaffna and the south. Gradually, government forces moved up the coast to take control of the A32 road, which linked up north and south under government control. From those positions, they began to take control of the even more strategic A9 route, which would link Jaffna with the south under government control for the first time in two decades. Movement was slow and often incremental, facing LTTE positions heavily defended using mined earthworks. As the campaign progressed, the LTTE was in the difficult position of effectively being a guerrilla army defending static positions, but with almost no air support and limited heavy weaponry to defend itself. Although an LTTE air capability did demonstrate its existence in early 2007 with bombing runs by light aircraft over Colombo, in reality these excursions demonstrated no significant military effect, although they were important for boosting morale and undermining the government’s narrative of ongoing success.

In January 2009 the incremental progress of the army up the coastline and around Kilinochchi suddenly showed significant progress. The army gained control of the key strategic junction on the A9 road at Paranthan, and retook the highly symbolic Elephant Pass, which guards the entry to the Jaffna peninsula, and had been much fought over in previous wars. The 53rd and 55th Divisions now threatened LTTE positions from the Jaffna peninsula. The LTTE faced probing attacks on four fronts, with the 58th and 57th divisions driving north and northeast towards the heavily defended town of Kilinochchi. The LTTE finally abandoned the defence of Kilinochchi in mid-January to avoid being encircled, and retreated to the interior. Meanwhile the 59th division was moving up the east coast towards Mullaitivu, pushing the LTTE further back into a small territory in the Vanni.

Between January and April 2009 government forces gradually closed the ring around remaining LTTE cadres, declaring a succession of ever smaller No-Fire Zones (NFZs) in which they claimed civilians would be safe from military attack. In reality, it appears that there was much less regard for civilian casualties than claimed by the military, and independent groups have argued that ‘the security forces intentionally and repeatedly shelled civilians, hospitals and humanitarian operations’ (ICG 2010: 5). UN agencies estimated that nearly
7,000 civilians were killed from January to April 2009, but other reports suggest the figure may have been as high as 30–40,000, including thousands killed in the last days of fighting in the final NFZ (ICG 2010: 5).

The final defeat of the LTTE came in the space of several days of intense fighting around this small NFZ in the northeast of the island. At this point the government was engaged in an intense diplomatic struggle to avoid international pressure for a ceasefire, which would have forced them to negotiate the surrender of the LTTE leadership or allow in some international presence to manage the final stages of the conflict. These initiatives reinvigorated fears among the leadership that international intervention would prevent their victory at the last moment. As a result, while strongly resisting a range of diplomatic initiatives to achieve a ceasefire, the military accelerated their push to defeat the LTTE completely. The exact details of the final days in May 2009 have been much disputed and have become the subject of a variety of investigations, but the military took control of the NFZ, killing most of the LTTE military leadership in the process, and taking about 280,000 civilians into internment camps; about 10,000 people, whom they claimed were LTTE military cadres, were placed in secure detention. This complete control of the LTTE movement, including civilians, effectively prevented any possibility of low-intensity conflict developing after the main military campaign was ended.

The end of the military part of the campaign initiated a new stage dominated by resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs), controversial government ‘filtration’ mechanisms of former LTTE activists, and redevelopment of the north and east. At the same time, President Rajapakse consolidated his hold on power, winning presidential elections in January 2010, in which he competed against Gen. Sarath Fonseka, the victorious army commander who had fallen out with the political leadership and resigned after the end of the military campaign. Fonseka was later arrested, and court-martialled on charges that were clearly provoked by the political rift between him and the political leadership. The arrest of Fonseka was only the most significant moment in a gradual trend towards a more authoritarian political system, dominated by the Rajapakse team, and with increasing pressure on any political opponents.

**Key military factors**

**Recruitment and tactics**

There are several reasons suggested for the improvement in military performance in 2006–9 compared with previous military campaigns. One simple explanation is a huge growth in recruitment to the armed forces during this period. During 2007 alone the army recruited 34,000 new personnel, bringing its strength in February 2008 up to 150,000, and the strength of the entire armed forces up to 200,000 (The Island 2008). There were frequent recruitment drives backed by increasing nationalist propaganda, which were also assisted by early successes in the war in the Eastern Province. Recruitment was also probably boosted by the difficult economic situation, partly caused by the resumption of conflict, which had badly affected the tourist industry and foreign investment. Increased recruitment allowed the army to open up more fronts, and to form new Task Forces and Divisions. By the last stages of the war, there were seven Divisions and eight Task Forces engaged in the campaign. In addition, four Special Forces regiments were active along and behind the front lines. By contrast, at the end of the war, there were probably only 10–11,000 LTTE fighters remaining, and even allowing for heavy losses, they were always significantly out-numbered and outgunned by government forces.

The military had enjoyed numerical superiority on the ground in the 1990s, but had nevertheless been defeated. Military tactics in 2006–9 were all informed by past failures, notably the
temptation to seek rapid gains in territory, which tended to leave forward units on over-extended supply chains, which were often easy for the LTTE to attack. Instead of seeking territory, government forces engaged in a war of attrition, seeking to achieve as high a rate of killing of LTTE cadres as possible, aware of the difficulties faced by the LTTE in recruitment, with reports emerging of forced recruitment of children and men over fighting age. Significantly improved training also appears to have contributed to improved performance in the 2006–9 conflict. Many more infantry underwent special commando training, which made them better prepared for flexible, small-team tactics led by younger commanders, moving away from the inflexible, top-down attitudes that had characterised previous campaigns. In addition, there was a rapid increase in the number of special forces organised in Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols, which carried out attacks on LTTE positions behind formally accepted lines of control, forcing the LTTE to shift resources to protect their rear and flank (DeSilva-Ranasinghe 2010: 4). Using these tactics and infantry troops trained in commando techniques, combined with Special Forces and LRRPs, the military was able to often act as an effective guerrilla force against LTTE forces, which were forced to adopt inflexible stances, defending static positions behind mined earthworks.

LTTE static positions were easy targets for repeated attacks by government multi-barrel rocket launchers (MBRL) and other artillery, to which the LTTE had little response. Moreover, with an almost complete monopoly of air power, government forces always had the advantage in these confrontations. The air force had procured Kfir jets under a previous administration, but procurement of aviation equipment and training was stepped up, and Pakistan provided significant technical support. By December 2008 the air force had carried out some 400 air strikes, and aerial surveillance also played an important role in the military campaign, including, for the first time, the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Air strikes in the later part of the campaign were primarily carried out against LTTE positions, but earlier in the offensive there were multiple strikes designed to decapitate the LTTE leadership. An air strike near Kilinochchi in November 2007 killed LTTE peace negotiator and head of its political wing S.P. Thamilselvan. The LTTE had little response to government air power. Although the LTTE had some level of anti-aircraft defence, its capability appears to have been quickly depleted. Anti-aircraft weapons were regularly sought in arms operations overseas but intercepted by law enforcement agencies.

Once the LTTE had abandoned its key defensive lines, many observers expected the LTTE to revert to its classic role as an insurgency using traditional guerrilla tactics. However, the LTTE was no longer the agile, flexible force of the 1990s, but the armed forces of a nascent state, cast in the difficult role of having to defend territory and defensive lines. It did attempt a series of terrorist attacks in the south, but some appear to have been foiled by police action, and others were less effective than in previous campaigns. In addition, as the LTTE retreated, it forced thousands of civilians to accompany it. This was probably a strategic error by the LTTE, which expended considerable energy on maintaining resources for maybe 250,000 civilians. It expected these civilians to serve as an effective ‘human shield’ to prevent complete military defeat, but this turned out not to be effective, largely owing to the government’s frequent disregard for civilian casualties in the final assault.

In contrast to contemporary US thinking, there was no stress on civilian protection in the Sri Lankan counterinsurgency. In the east, Tamil civilians were at the mercy of pro-government Tamil militias, while in the north, the civilian population was forced to move with the LTTE, ensuring that the military did not have to deal with a civilian population. When forward military units entered settlements, they were almost always already abandoned. In many confrontations, however, civilians were clearly present in areas under attack by the government, and in many cases there were high numbers of civilian deaths. It appears that government forces did not take
sufficient care to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants in these offensives; reliable reports document repeated violations of the laws of war with regard to civilians (ICG 2010). The LTTE, of course, deliberately used civilians in this way and also blurred the lines between civilian and non-civilian, with much of the population forced to work in support of the military campaign in various capacities.

Supply routes

A key factor in the defeat of the LTTE was the ability of the military to cut off supplies to the interior, both from the sea and from corrupt relationships with state and commercial agents in the south. One of the main complaints of the military during the 2002–5 ceasefire was that they were not permitted to intercept arms transfers by sea, allowing the LTTE to rearm with impunity. During 2007 an important front opened up at sea, with several interceptions by the Sri Lankan navy of LTTE arms shipments. The LTTE was reputed to control several commercial shipping networks, some of which were involved in arms smuggling.

In previous campaigns, the LTTE had always maintained a route to India, both for smuggling in weapons and for key individuals to travel back and forth. These routes partly followed traditional smuggling routes to India, and relied on support structures in Tamil Nadu. During this campaign, it appears that the Sri Lankan navy was increasingly successful in cutting off this supply route, and was probably aided by increased pressure from the Indian side on pro-LTTE Tamils. Effectively, this deprived the LTTE of their ‘hinterland’, which ensured that when they were forced back into Mullaitivu, there was no possibility to escape and reignite a low-level insurgency later.

Political factors

While the military campaign demonstrated significant innovations in strategy, tactics and above all equipment and recruitment, President Rajapakse and his allies demonstrated an approach to the political aspects of the counterinsurgency entirely at odds with emerging COIN doctrine elsewhere. From the very beginning, Rajapakse was uncomfortable about the peace process with the LTTE, and after late 2006, with the peace talks over, he moved to a more uncompromising position, which ruled out negotiations with ‘terrorists’. At the same time, he came under strong pressure from the opposition and the international community to develop a political strategy that would include commitments to autonomy for the Tamils, which could win over the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Tamil people. Rajapakse responded with a series of essentially fictive institutions and roundtables to discuss the issue, but none had any political weight behind them, and they were all ignored. India pushed for implementation of the so-called thirteenth amendment to the constitution, which allowed for effective autonomy for a northeastern province, but Rajapakse demonstrated opposition to any such autonomy by demerging the northern and eastern provinces.

While failing to develop a political solution that would appeal to the broad mass of Tamils, Rajapakse did develop the co-optation of pro-government Tamils such as Karuna and long-term allies such as Douglas Devananda. Such pro-government Tamils were always at risk of assassination by the LTTE, but they were frequently used to dismiss accusations against the government of Sinhala chauvinism. However, the government was more responsive to right-wing nationalist forces, such as militant Buddhist groups, and parties such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), who rejected any concessions to Tamils, and supported extreme nationalist positions in favour of the Sinhalese majority. Politically, the president benefited from the
weakness of the mainstream opposition party, which was unable to mount any effective campaign against the government during the war.

It was in the sphere of communications that the government’s real ruthlessness emerged. Before the war, Sri Lanka had a lively and often critical press, including Tamil nationalist media outlets. After 2006, attacks and pressure on independent media intensified, with frequent attacks on journalists, including several murders. Media employees were targeted in the so-called ‘white van’ disappearances, in which individuals were abducted by unknown persons, often in Colombo. The government asserted almost complete control over television coverage of the war, and slowly critical voices were also limited in print media. The Ministry of Defence set up a comprehensive media operation, with a strong presence on the Internet, and complete control over access to the conflict zones. For the most part, there was only very limited access to the battlefield in the north for any foreign journalists, and some more critical journalists found it difficult to get visas to enter the country. NGOs and human rights organisations also found it difficult to conduct research. Although this media operation did not prevent critical reporting of the war in the international media, it did provide an alternative narrative that stressed Sri Lanka’s role in the ‘war on terror’, and prevented critics from gaining detailed accounts of the conduct of the war while it continued.

The international environment

The military activities of 2007 in Eastern Province gave the government increasing confidence that they could engage in a military confrontation with the LTTE and win. However, they remained particularly concerned about the potential for the international community, and India in particular, to attempt to stop any offensive before the LTTE was defeated. This fear of external intervention was largely the result of a particular nationalist reading of history, in which Indian intervention in 1987 and again in 1992 had prevented a defeat of the LTTE; whether correct or not, it was a powerful factor in fuelling often virulent reactions to any international criticism. These attitudes were compounded by a complex post-colonial situation which affected Sri Lankan attitudes to the UK in particular, and the West in general.

The government pursued this strategy in several key ways. First, they increased pressure on domestic NGOs, with particular links to the international community, and on the activities of international NGOs and humanitarian organisations. This made many international organisations more cautious about criticising military actions. Second, they took an aggressive stance towards any criticism of the government by international interlocutors, labelling critics as ‘terrorist sympathisers’ or ‘lackeys’ of the LTTE. Third, they strongly resisted any type of international intervention, including proposals for a UN human rights mission. Above all, they benefited from a changing diplomatic landscape, in which China and other allies were able to counteract Western pressure and provide Sri Lanka with financial and diplomatic support. In a key event in May 2009, liberal states failed to gain sufficient votes to censure Sri Lanka’s human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, with China, India, Brazil and other major powers blocking a critical resolution (Lewis 2010).

Conclusion: a successful counterinsurgency?

After several years of discussion among COIN experts in the West about downplaying military aspects of strategy and promoting political and civilian protection issues, the Sri Lankan case appears to be a sharp response to such views. The view promoted by Rajapakse that ‘Terrorism has to be wiped out militarily and cannot be tackled politically’ (Shashkumar
2009: 13) is sharply at odds with emerging thinking in the US military and elsewhere. The apparent conclusion from Sri Lanka that highly repressive methods can be effective in counterinsurgency campaigns, contradicting other COIN doctrines, has been noted with some concern by US observers (Kaplan 2010; Lewis 2010; ICG 2010). However, the apparent success of the Rajapakse strategy may be rather specific to Sri Lanka, and not easily replicable elsewhere.

Certainly the military improved their training, procurement and organisation markedly since the 1990s, and recruitment increased rapidly. Improved air power proved a significant advantage, as did new tactics at sea that helped to block off shipping lanes. However, the government also owes much to changes in the capability and positioning of the LTTE. By 2005 the LTTE was no longer primarily an insurgent fighting force, but a conventional force with non-traditional tactics, including the use of suicide bombers. It occupied territory, patrolled front lines, was based in static positions and headquarters, and had substantial reliance on traditional supply routes by land and sea. However, it did not have sufficient strength in depth, either in manpower or in equipment, to fight a drawn out conventional war, and it was peculiarly vulnerable to a well-planned concerted military campaign that would attack the weaknesses of its conventional positioning. It had no strategic hinterland to withdraw to, and was therefore unable to resume a low-level insurgency, at least initially. The military planned its strategy around these vulnerabilities, using the LRRP as an effective guerrilla force to attack behind front lines, and air power and artillery to dismantle defensive positions. While very effective, the campaign may not offer significant strategic lessons for tackling other insurgencies, which do not suffer from similar liabilities.

The ability to cut off the LTTE from funding and supplies was extremely important and relied not only on physical interceptions but on an understanding of a huge network of corrupt supply routes that were an important part of Sri Lanka’s political economy. Some of this took the form of extra-legal killings of suppliers or businessmen; in other cases, legal avenues were used. Often other Tamil militias were used to replace LTTE extortion rackets, usually by simply taking over the same mechanisms. At the same time, the government pushed for international interception of LTTE arms smuggling and financial dealings with some success. All these methods were effective in severely limiting supplies to the LTTE, but also did little to actually dismantle these informal networks of organised crime and politics, which continue to be important in the Sri Lankan context. Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan case points towards the importance of an understanding of the complex nexus between legal business, organised crime and insurgency.

In the political sphere, there was almost no concession made to the Tamil nationalist parties; instead Rajapakse concentrated exclusively on buttressing his own power at the expense of opposition parties, using patronage politics to encourage defections from the opposition, and to win the support of minority parties. This provided him with a streamlined political system, in which the views of the opposition could be ignored during the course of the war, but left Sri Lanka at the end of the war with a significantly weakened democratic system, in which almost all political power was concentrated in the hands of the presidency. Judicial and parliamentary checks on the executive became almost non-existent, and high-level corruption and abuses of rights became commonplace, while patronage became the main means of control. The strong reliance on Sinhala nationalism to increase support for the war was also likely to make post-conflict reconciliation more difficult, as was the political leadership’s refusal to seek a political solution acceptable to the Tamil minority. Meanwhile, accusations of war crimes continued to undermine Sri Lanka’s reputation abroad and limited potential international assistance to deal with the post-conflict environment.
While militarily highly successful, Sri Lanka’s counterinsurgency campaign contained some worrying trends, which had broader consequences than the short-term military campaign. Widespread abuse of human rights during the campaign changed the nature of the state itself, confirming the view that counterinsurgency campaigns often have a major impact not only on the battlefield, but also on domestic political institutions. In addition, Sri Lanka’s place in the world changed as a result of the war, with much closer relations emerging with countries like Iran and China at the expense of the United States and EU states. While Sri Lanka’s counterinsurgency tried to focus solely on the military goal of defeating the LTTE, the way it was conducted had and will continue to have very significant political consequences.

**Recommended readings**


**References**


