

THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM:
A REVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT

For twenty-six years, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) waged a protracted secessionist insurgency against the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) with the aim of creating an independent homeland for the country's minority Sri Lankan Tamil population. In addition to mastering guerrilla warfare, the LTTE fielded a formidable conventional force including a maritime arm capable of challenging the Sri Lankan Navy and a nascent air wing capable of striking targets inside government-held territory. Yet despite its military prowess, the LTTE suffered a crushing military defeat by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces in May 2009. This thesis aims to investigate the factors that led to demise of the LTTE during the final phase of the conflict, Eelam War IV. Towards this end, this paper applies a theory of warfare, the “revolutions in military affairs” (RMAs), as a framework within which to analyze the actions of the LTTE and the GoSL. In doing so, I show that the LTTE’s military defeat is a direct consequence of Velupillai Prabhakaran’s fixation with achieving the group’s original aim - creating an independent Tamil Eelam homeland - through a military solution while largely discounting the political implications of changes in the conflict environment.

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“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory...Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”

Sun Tzu (544 BC - 496 BC), Chinese Philosopher of War

INTRODUCTION

Research Focus and Question

Long before Hezbollah humbled the Israeli Defense Forces through a combination of irregular and conventional operations in the 2006 Lebanon War, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were displaying a lethal mix of tactical proficiency spanning the entire guerrilla-conventional continuum on the teardrop-shaped island of Sri Lanka. This different, but not so novel, “hybrid” approach to warfare incorporated combined ways of war including a wide array of emerging technologies and pioneering tactics that helped level the playing field militarily between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan state.¹ For over three decades, the LTTE not only launched spectacular attacks with devastating effect on the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), it also set the standard for operational art and technical innovation by an armed non-state actor.² In addition to mastering guerrilla warfare, the LTTE fielded a formidable conventional force including a maritime arm capable of challenging the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) and a nascent air wing capable of striking targets inside government-held territory.³ Yet despite its military prowess, the LTTE suffered a crushing military defeat by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) in May 2009.

¹ Retired U.S. Marine Corps officer and scholar Frank Hoffman has made the most significant academic contributions to the understanding and expansion of hybrid warfare theory to date. Hoffman defines ‘hybrid’ wars as conflicts involving conventional and irregular approaches by the same units in the same battlespace. Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: The Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), 8, 29; See also Frank Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52 (1st Quarter 2009).

² In this context, operational art is not a ‘level of war’ but the balancing between strategic and tactical reasoning. See retired U.S. Army brigadier general Huba Wass de Czege, “Thinking and Acting like an Early Explorer: Operational Art is Not a Level of War,” *Small Wars Journal* (14 March 2011).

³ For a comprehensive overview of subversion, see William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency*, Occasional Paper 2 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007).

The LTTE is a national separatist group that waged a protracted military campaign against Sri Lanka's ethnic Sinhalese-dominated government with the aim of creating an autonomous homeland for the country's minority Sri Lankan Tamil population in the island's northern and northeastern regions. The quest for an independent "Tamil Eelam" was led by the charismatic and unswerving Velupillai Prabhakaran. Through the use of unconventional tactics such as suicide bombings and assassinations, and the use of subversive tools and techniques, especially to access funds and resources through its million-plus Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, Prabhakaran demonstrated the advantages that the guerrilla held fighting the war of the flea.⁴

Building on a successful irregular warfare model of guerrillas and terrorists operating at the small-unit level, the Tamil Tigers gradually developed the capacity to conduct conventional warfare against the SLAF. Yet despite achieving numerous tactical and operational successes that led to stalemate and several internationally brokered ceasefires over the insurgency's lifespan, the LTTE neither developed a conventional force capable of forcing the GoSL into capitulation nor succeeded in finding a political solution to bring about their desired end. Unknown to Velupillai Prabhakaran at the time, the election of hardliner Mahinda Rajapaksa to Sri Lanka's highest office in 2005 was one of several key changes to the post-9/11 conflict environment that symbolized the beginning of the end for the Tamil insurgency. Ultimately, the improved capabilities of the SLAF proved too much and stalemate was followed by the annihilation of the LTTE as a cohesive military force.

Throughout the final phase of the war, or what is commonly referred to by analysts as "Eelam War IV" (July 2006 - May 2009), Velupillai Prabhakaran made the strategic error of repeatedly defending terrain in conventional set-piece battles against a superior military force enabled by national mobilization under determined civil authorities. Although the resolve of Sri

⁴ Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2002).

Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the improved capabilities of the SLAF contributed significantly to the defeat of the LTTE, there also are other factors that contributed to their demise. This research aims to investigate those factors. In the simplest terms, why did the LTTE fail to implement a strategy that reflected its own strengths and weaknesses as well as changes in the conflict environment during Eelam War IV? Towards this end, this paper applies a theory of warfare, the “revolutions in military affairs” (RMAs), as a framework within which to analyze the conflict between the LTTE and the GoSL.⁵

Hypothesis

During the final years of the insurgency, Velupillai Prabhakaran made a series of strategic mistakes that ultimately led to the defeat of the secessionist Tamil insurgents. This thesis argues that the LTTE’s military defeat is a direct consequence of Velupillai Prabhakaran’s fixation with achieving the group’s original aim - creating an independent Tamil Eelam homeland - through a military solution while largely discounting the political implications of changes in the conflict environment during Eelam War IV.

Scope

This study aims to gain a better understanding of the factors that most impacted the LTTE’s strategy - and therefore their defeat - during one phase of the conflict, Eelam War IV. What is most striking about the outcome of the insurgency is not just the complete obliteration of the Tamil Tigers as an organized military force, but also the decapitation of its entire leadership and thus the *diminished* prospect of any future capacity to wage guerilla war. With unsavory tactics employed by both sides during the conflict, insights into the demise of the LTTE may be gained by analyzing the role that Velupillai Prabhakaran and his counterpart Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa played in shaping the outcome of events and by studying the

⁵ Peter Wilson, *Revolutions in Military Affairs, 1914 to 2014: Adapting to Discontinuities in U.S. National Security Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, unpublished research, June 2009).

external factors that shaped the conflict environment. The former is particularly significant given the key role that individuals play in the making of international relations, but the limited significance they are ascribed by political scientists and by scholars in general.

With changes in the conflict environment affecting the strategies of each party, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the demise of the LTTE by employing the concept of the revolution in military affairs (RMAs) to explore the measure-countermeasure dynamic of warfare. By unpacking the RMAs, the factors that most impacted each party's strategy during Eelam War IV will be identified and a sharper analysis of the interplay and overlap of different ways of war will be described. The goal here is to show that political aims and military strategy should reflect shifting priorities in a fluid conflict environment.

Just as war is not an either/or phenomena between conventional or irregular warfare, counterinsurgency (COIN) is not a choice between population- and enemy-centric methods and best practices. As COIN scholar Dr. David Kilcullen notes, "Insurgencies, like cancers, exist in thousands of forms, and...the idea that there is one 'silver bullet' panacea for insurgency is therefore as unrealistic as the idea of a universal cure for cancer."⁶ As such, this study does not attempt to litigate what often proves to be a false choice between competing approaches to countering insurgents. Constantly overlapping and changing over time, the ways in which governments wage counterinsurgency depend on the characteristics of a conflict environment including the makeup of both the counterinsurgents and the insurgents. This study touches only briefly on the merits of population-centric or enemy-centric approaches to counterinsurgency as they relate to the conflict type and to the ways of war (RMAs) employed by the GoSL.⁷

⁶ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 1.

⁷ For analysis on Sri Lankan COIN operations, see Niel Smith, "Understanding Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 59 (4th Quarter 2010); Lionel Beehner, "What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN" *Small Wars Journal* (27 August 2010); and Christian Chung, "The Killer Tiger Roared: A Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan "Kinetic" Counterinsurgency and its Theoretical Implications," *Small Wars Journal* (15 December 2010).

Significance

While the nature of warfare does not change (i.e. breaking things and killing people), the character and methods (i.e. improved tactics coupled with advanced technologies and globalization) available to wage wars do. Illustrative of this point is the transformation, over more than three decades, of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam from a small military force capable of conducting hit-and-run style guerrilla and terrorist operations into a hybrid force structure capable of coordinating fires and employing combined arms against the SLAF. In addition to developing the capacity to employ conventional and irregular approaches in the same battlespace, the trajectory of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka highlights a common theme of the 21st century global security environment: increasingly powerful armed non-state actors - insurgents, militias, guerrillas, terrorists, organized criminals or a mix thereof - acquiring or developing the tools and techniques to challenge or undercut traditional strengths and concepts of operation of national militaries.

What is also remarkable about the progression of the LTTE is that it occurred, for the most part, without formal state support. Losing sponsorship from India's Intelligence Services in 1987, the LTTE relied extensively on its half-million plus Sri Lankan Tamil global diaspora that began fleeing the country to escape ethnic violence in the early 1980s.⁸ By infiltrating and organizing its diaspora, the LTTE used subversive activities to raise funds, procure weapons, start legitimate enterprises, disseminate targeted propaganda and conduct money transfer operations. The commercial arm of this network, composed of both legitimate ventures (e.g., international calling cards, real estate and commercial shipping) and illicit activities (e.g., drug, weapons and human smuggling) ultimately provided the means for the Tamil Tigers to wage a

⁸ Before Prabhakaran consolidated the disparate Sri Lankan Tamil groups, Tamil militants were trained and equipped in Tamil Nadu by India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). From September 1983 and July 1987, RAW trained an estimated twelve hundred Tamil militants in southern India. See Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 123.

protracted insurgency against the GoSL. With access to funds and resources through its base of external support, the Tamil Tigers became the world's first modern four-dimensional insurgent group, developing the capacity to operate to various degrees on land, in the air, on the seas and underwater.⁹ Given the extent to which the LTTE used its Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora for political and propaganda purposes, the subversive arm of the Tamil Tigers is arguably even more impressive than its ability to engage in hybrid warfare.

The role and significance of individuals in conflict is almost always discounted for the more generally accepted factors of legitimacy, political will and inadequate resources in small wars, or for organizational or institutional dynamics and anarchy in large ones. However, an analysis of the conflict in Sri Lanka is not complete without taking into account the critical role that Vellupillai Prabhakaran and his counterpart Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa played in determining the outcome of Eelam War IV. Similar to Fathi Shikaki, the founding father of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), who was assassinated by the Israeli Mossad in 1995, Prabhakaran was the single most important factor in sustaining the movement, both organizing the substantial resources of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in support of an independent homeland and leading the LTTE to impressive military and psychological victories over disparate Tamil factions and GoSL forces, until his death in May 2009. Akin to the loss of Shikaki for the PIJ, the death of Velupillai Prabhakaran has proved devastating for the LTTE.

Similarly, President Mahinda Rajapaksa played a critical role in extinguishing the flames of the twenty-six year insurgency. By mobilizing the will and resources of the entire state, President Rajapaksa was able to successfully implement a strategy to collapse an insurgent organization by military defeat and leadership decapitation. Even before total victory for the SLAF became likely, Rajapaksa chose the suppression of violence through a military-centric

⁹ Tim Fish, "Sri Lankan Troops Uncover LTTE Submersibles," *Jane's Navy International* (17 February 2009).

approach in which “Hearts and minds took a backseat to shock and awe.”¹⁰ That the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils did not support the government was largely irrelevant. Despite significant changes to the conflict environment leading up to Eelam War IV, Prabhakaran continued to overestimate his own capabilities, holding out for his nationalistic vision of an autonomous Tamil Eelam.

Roadmap

This thesis will first examine the origins of conflict by outlining the key events that led to four decades of violence between the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority and the Tamil-Hindu minority following the British departure from Sri Lanka in 1948. I then present a brief introduction on military strategy prior to breaking into an analysis of the conflict through the theory of revolutions in military affairs (RMAs). Armed with a comprehensive understanding of the different ways of war employed by both the LTTE and GoSL, the paper unpacks the individual, organizational and systemic level factors that most impacted the conflict environment. Using this rich foundation, the study then highlights the key roles that both LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and his counterpart Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa played in the determining the outcome of Eelam War IV. Finally, this thesis concludes by outlining the research’s key findings including the implications that rapid advances in technologies will have on U.S. military capability development and the future conflict environment more broadly.

CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND

Ethno-nationalist Conflict

Centuries of cordial relations between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Sri Lankan Tamils were overturned after the former Dutch, Portuguese and British colony of Ceylon was granted independence from Britain in 1948. Composed of two competing ethnic populations, the

¹⁰ Lionel Beehner, “What Sri Lanka Can Teach Us About COIN.”

majority Sinhalese-Buddhists and the minority Sri Lankan Tamil-Hindus, both of whom have resided on the island for millennia, Sri Lanka's 30-year armed rebellion is best defined as an ethno-nationalist conflict rooted in the country's colonial past.¹¹ During the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain's divide and conquer policy engendered feelings of humiliation for the Sinhalese majority, which in turn provided the catalyst for conflict.¹² The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam emerged as a response to reactionary discriminatory policies directed at the minority Sri Lankan Tamil population by the Sinhalese-dominated government. Although a reoccurring theme of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony appeared routinely throughout the conflict, the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist movement is most accurately viewed through the prism of linguistic and reactive nationalism.¹³

In the decades following independence, the Sinhala-controlled government implemented inequitable policies that provided the backdrop for nearly forty years of violence. Writing in 1998, international terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna stated that, "the history of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka has been a history of broken promises by Sinhala leaders. It is incontrovertible that the Tamils have suffered ethnic violence as a direct consequence of the folly of Sri Lankan political leaders."¹⁴ In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese humiliation left over from British rule led to discriminatory policies and state institutions that failed to provide a functioning framework for the realization of Tamil minority rights.

¹¹ Christine Fair, "Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies: Insights from the Khalistan and Tamil Eelam Movements," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 11 (2005): 137. Neil DeVotta, "Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," in *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, eds. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003): 105-139.

¹² Neil DeVotta, "Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," 105.

¹³ For accounts of Sri Lanka's history, see Kenneth Bush, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Conflict Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (Spring 1990): 41-58; Sumantra Bose, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994); Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); and Devanesan Nesiah, "The Claim to Self-determination: a Sri Lankan Tamil Perspective," *South Asia*, 10: 1 (March 2001): 55-71.

¹⁴ Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis and National Security* (Sri Lanka: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1998), 369.

On the island of 22 million, the Sinhalese comprise the majority with over 70 percent of the population while Tamils (Sri Lankan and Indian) account for approximately 12-15 percent. The total percentage of Tamils is probably much smaller given the vast amount of blood that has been spilled over the last three decades and the hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils that fled the island in the 1980s. Other ethnic minorities including Moors and Christians make up the rest.¹⁵ With the majority of Sinhalese residing in the southern and western portions of the island and most Sri Lankan Tamils living in the eastern and northern provinces, the island remains physically divided on ethnic lines. “The Sinhalese have traditionally lived in the south, with its lush land and ancient reservoir-fed rice paddies,” notes acclaimed war correspondent John Lee Anderson, “The Tamils lived in the arid scrublands of the north, known as the Vanni, and the lowland jungles of the east, areas their ancestors had occupied two thousand years ago, during wars of conquest waged by Hindu kings from Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of India.”¹⁶

Yet a significant number of the Sri Lankan Tamil community also lives in the multiethnic capital Colombo, where they constitute a large part of the professional and business community. Although the Moors are largely concentrated in the east, they, like the Indian Plantation Tamils who reside in the central highlands, consider their ethnic identities distinct from that of the Sri Lankan Tamils. This separate Indian Tamil community consists of former indentured laborers whom the British imported to Sri Lanka from India in the 1830s to work mostly on tea plantations. After decades of seasonal migration, the Indian Tamils settled in the central highlands in the late 19th century, but abstained deliberately from participating in the conflict.¹⁷

¹⁵ These statistics are drawn from two competing censuses. Although a partial census that excluded seven northern and eastern districts was conducted in Sri Lanka in 2001, the last complete island census was conducted in 1981. See Neil DeVotta, “The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka,” *Asian Survey*, 49:6 (2009): 1024. See also *Statistical Pocket Book of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, 1996), 15-16.

¹⁶ John Lee Anderson, “Death of a Tiger,” *The New Yorker* 86: 44 (17 January 2011).

¹⁷ See Christine Fair, “Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies,” 137-138; Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 103 footnote four.

After consolidating the island within a cohesive administrative structure and modernizing its infrastructure through the construction of an advanced network of roads and railways, the British colonists centered their development efforts on the predominately Sinhalese central and western areas of the island. This arrangement resulted in the exclusion of the Sri Lankan Tamils from the government sector, who in response, turned to the trade and education systems established by American and British missionaries in Jaffna, the informal Tamil capital.¹⁸ According to scholar Neil Devotta, “under British colonial domination, non-Buddhists and ethnic minorities became disproportionately over-represented in the bureaucracy, civil service, and primary and secondary educational institutions.”¹⁹ By taking advantage of the western education system, the Sri Lankan Tamil elites, along with another minority group of Christian Sinhalese elite, came to be overrepresented in state institutions and universities.²⁰

By contrast, the rejection of Christian missionaries and with them the English language resulted in fewer opportunities for the majority Sinhalese in the English-language dominated government administration. By the mid-1950s, the Sinhalese-dominated parliamentary system began pursuing reactive discriminatory policies aimed at bolstering the relative position of the Sinhalese majority, including through the Sinhala-Only Movement; the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956 which established the official state language; and the Standardization of Education Act in 1970 which included a quota system to boost Sinhalese university admission numbers in certain districts.²¹ Although efforts to find a political solution to the country’s ethnic problems lasted well into the 1970s, Sinhalese linguistic nationalism along with Buddhist outrage over perceived

¹⁸ Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 103; Christine Fair, “Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies,” 137-138.

¹⁹ Neil DeVotta, “Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka,” 113.

²⁰ Nathan Katz, “Buddhism and Politics in Sri Lanka and Other Theravada Nations since 1945,” in *Movements and Issues in World Religions: A Sourcebook on Developments since 1945*, eds. Charles Weihsun Fu and Gerhard E. Spiegler (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 157-175.

²¹ Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 103; Neil DeVotta, “Lost Quest for Separatism,” 1025-1026.

historical injustices produced unity among the diverse Sinhalese population, while marginalizing and alienating Sri Lankan Tamils. During this period, Sinhalese politicians, many of whom were pushed to the right by religious factions, often gave inflammatory hypernational speeches stressing more pro-Sinhalese legislation which ultimately fueled the flames of ethnic conflict.²² This tension had the unnerving potential to explode into civil war for which the 1983 riots in Colombo provided the spark.

LTTE Formation

The Tamil insurgency emerged in response to discriminatory government policy that continued to alienate the ethnic Sri Lankan Tamils. The first group to advocate a policy of violence to achieve political ends was the Tamil Student Front, a youth movement comprised of highly educated Tamils in Jaffna who were disproportionately affected by the Standardization of Education Act.²³ With one group championing violence, another, the Tamil United Front (TUF), integrated the disparate elements of legitimate Tamil political parties in an attempt to gain concessions from the Sinhala-dominated government. Despite its best efforts, however, the TUF was unable to provoke a change in Sinhala policy, and as such a new Tamil political party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) emerged. TULF took a more hardline approach to pressing for an independent Tamil Eelam homeland but were still unable to bring about change.²⁴ Meanwhile, disparate Tamil militant groups, sometimes encouraged by the TULF, began engaging in hit-and-run style guerrilla attacks on ethnic Tamil government supporters and sympathizers.

²² James Manor, "Organizational Weakness and the Rise of Sinhalese Buddhist Extremism," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 774; Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 109.

²³ Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare: the Tamil Tigers' Assault on East Kiran," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20: 3 (2009): 464-465.

²⁴ Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare," 465.

The first structured militant force to appear was the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), a quasi-criminal organization that eventually proliferated into 35 other different Tamil militant groups.²⁵ To advance its cause, the TNT began prosecuting a campaign of terror against both pro-government Tamils and Sinhalese which included the assassination of the Tamil mayor of Jaffna in 1975.²⁶ With a high profile assassination added to its resume, the TNT became a household name among Sri Lankan Tamils. The group's first major setback, the arrest of its first leader, Chetti Thanabalsingham in 1975, provided an opening for the group's deputy, Velupillai Prabhakaran, to assume command. The following year, Prabhakaran renamed the organization the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.²⁷

From the Tamil Tigers' earliest days, Prabhakaran's heavy-handed leadership shaped nearly every aspect of the group's evolution into a well-trained, loyal and dedicated fighting force bent on achieving one goal - establishing a homeland for the minority Sri Lankan Tamils in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka. According to terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, "an integral element of the LTTE's institutional ethos was the principle of individual self-sacrifice and martyrdom for the greater, future good of the Tamil people."²⁸ This sense of purpose was borne out in its dedicated suicide wing, the Black Tigers. Claiming to be the sole representative of Sri Lankan Tamils, Velupillai Prabhakaran consolidated his power over the next decade by killing thousands of rival Tamil leaders and key cadres who dissented from the group's ideology in a vicious intra-communal struggle.

Sinhalese linguistic nationalism along with fits of Buddhist outrage over perceived historical economic and social injustices created unity among the diverse Sinhalese population. Consequently, the actions of the Sinhalese youth exacerbated ethnic tensions by encouraging

²⁵ Rohan Gunaratna, *War and Peace in Sri Lanka* (Sri Lanka: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1987), 27.

²⁶ Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare," 465.

²⁷ Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 109.

²⁸ Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare," 465.

parochial identities rather than by working to promote a Sri Lankan identity that transcended ethnic lines. Despite several watershed events including the adoption of the Republican Constitution of 1972 which gave foremost status to Buddhism, the parliamentary elections in 1977 that saw the TULF become the main opposition party in parliament and violent anti-Tamil riots in 1977 and 1981, the flashpoint in this ethno-centric conflict occurred on July 23, 1983 when the LTTE initiated a landmine ambush against a truck carrying thirteen Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna. The attack left all 13 soldiers dead.²⁹

The ensuing chaos that erupted across the country over the next four days, known as “Black July,” included widespread ethnic violence and looting aimed at Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils and their property by the Sinhalese majority. Reports suggest that as many as 2,000 Tamils were killed during the riots that started in Colombo but spread as far as Trincomolee.³⁰ This retaliatory violence by the Sinhalese, along with a weak government response - or perhaps even complicity - also led to hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and the displacement into refugee camps of nearly 70 percent of Colombo’s Tamils.³¹ As a result, several hundred thousand Tamils fled Sri Lanka to escape a government that had turned its back on an ethnic minority.

Over the next twenty-six years, the LTTE conducted guerrilla and terrorist operations against rival Tamil groups and the government of Sri Lanka. They also engaged in subversive activities by infiltrating legitimate organizations, Sri Lankan Tamil and otherwise, and by creating front groups to spread propaganda, raise funds for the insurgency and shape the

²⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the LTTE land mine ambush in Jaffna in 1983, which killed 13 Sinhala government soldiers, as the official start of the twenty-six year secessionist insurgency that ended in May 2009.

³⁰ Neil DeVotta, “Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka,” 135. See also Alfred Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

³¹ Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 116. See also Patricia Hyndman, *Sri Lanka: Serendipity under Siege* (Nottingham, U.K.: Spokesman, 1988).

geopolitical environment.³² With its leadership based in Sri Lanka, the LTTE organized the diaspora into three broad sectors - financing, propaganda and weapons procurement.³³ Unlike most non-state actors, the revenue earned from its subversive activities allowed it to make the transition from guerrilla warfare to a hybrid force structure equipped with a naval arm and a nascent air wing. By mastering the art of armed rebellion in Sri Lanka and subversion on five continents, the LTTE embarked on a long journey of military innovation that transpired in multiple ways of war being waged by the same forces in the same battlespace. For twenty-six years, the global Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora played the key role in outfitting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam with the tools and techniques to absorb and apply new ways of war against the GoSL.

Key Considerations

Velupillai Prabhakaran's dedication to the Sri Lankan Tamil cause gave rise to what was once considered the world's most formidable non-state military organization. During three decades of protracted warfare against the GoSL, two constants embodied the Tamil Tigers. First is Velupillai Prabhakaran himself, who as commander-in-chief, exercised near totalitarian control over the LTTE until his ignominious death in May 2009 at the hands of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Second, is the original political aim of creating an independent Tamil Eelam homeland from which Prabhakaran and his Tigers never relented militarily. Although measuring the impact of these two mutually reinforcing factors on the outcome of the conflict will prove difficult, their influence on the failed strategy of the Tigers in Eelam War IV cannot be overstated. Other factors that must be taken into account include: the primary driver of the conflict, the enmity between ethnic Sinhalese and ethnic Sri Lankan Tamils; the unique conflict environment, the island geography of Sri Lanka; and the conflict type, a fairly classic kinetic

³² William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency*, 12-13.

³³ Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau and David Branna, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 43.

campaign across clearly identified battlelines with the LTTE controlling territory, administratively as well as militarily, since the mid-1980s.

Military Considerations

Strategy is a successive process involving the identification of ends, their alignment with means, and the choices that link them both together. Understanding how military organizations come to adopt strategies that reflect internal strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their opponent is therefore critical to the study of war. Lacking a clear understanding of the capabilities of the GoSL, Velupillai Prabhakaran failed to adopt a strategy that protected what prominent Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz coined a Center of Gravity (CoG) during Eelam War IV.³⁴ The CoG construct rests on a physics analogy to warfare that seeks to disrupt an adversary's balance by identifying and targeting the source of strength from which a military force derives its freedom of action or will to fight.³⁵ However, since CoGs are not generally easily targeted, an indirect approach may be necessary to strike at an adversary's "decisive points."³⁶ According to a contemporary of Clausewitz, Henri-Antoine Jomini, sound strategy centered on one fundamental prescription: apply superior strength to the decisive point of a weaker adversary to ensure destruction. While undermining or striking at the CoG with enough force may compromise an organization's ability to function, attacking decisive points may be the best method to expose an adversary's critical vulnerabilities. Throughout the conflict, the Tamil Tigers had at least two Centers of Gravity, Velupillai Prabhakaran and the Sri Lankan

³⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Indexed ed., Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 485-486, 595-596.

³⁵ A CoG may be either moral or physical, or both, and an armed non-state actor such as a terrorist or insurgent organization may have multiple CoGs.

³⁶ An early nineteenth century Swiss banker turned obscure military theorist, Jomini defined decisive points as things "whose attack or capture would imperil or seriously weaken the enemy." John Shy, "Jomini," in *The Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 152-154.

Tamil diaspora and several decisive points, including a fleet of seafaring cargo vessels and floating warehouses that helped maintain its sea lines of communication and supply.

In military studies, operational art looks not only at the employment of military forces but also at the arrangement of their efforts in time, space and purpose. A key advantage that the Tamil Tigers displayed on the battlefield throughout most of the insurgency was the ability to choose the time and place of its engagements. As Sun Tzu's stated in his classic treatise on strategy, *The Art of War*, "He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be victorious."³⁷ With an agile guerrilla force, Velupillai Prabhakaran used speed, surprise and sequence to create a huge tactical advantage for his forces during Eelam Wars I-III. However, in Eelam War IV, Velupillai Prabhakaran largely ignored Sun-Tzu's advice by routinely massing his forces in space (conventional warfare) in an attempt to hold key terrain against a superior enemy force. This approach proved disastrous, especially after the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) had neutralized the LTTE's sea lines of communication and supply, thereby severing its primary means for sustaining its hybrid force posture. What is clear to students of the insurgency in Sri Lanka is that the Tamil Tigers failed to adjust its political aims and implement a strategy that reflected changes in the conflict environment.

Influenced by Clausewitz and Sun-Tzu, Mao Zedong's classic work *On Guerrilla Warfare* describes a pyramidal theory divided into three linear phases - strategic defensive, stalemate and strategic offensive - that the guerrilla must follow sequentially in order to topple a government.³⁸ During the first phase, or strategic defensive, insurgents use guerrilla tactics to erode the will and strength of government forces. During the second phase, or stalemate, neither side can better its position into something advantageous. As such, guerrillas use the time to recover and refit. When the advantage tilts towards the guerrilla, the insurgents enter the third

³⁷ Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

³⁸ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1961).

phase, or the strategic offensive, in which organized conventional units engage in mobile warfare in order to defeat government forces. According to Mao's three phase theory, guerrillas cannot achieve their objective unless they make the transition to conventional forces but they must maintain the ability to shift between phases in either direction.

Gradually progressing along Mao Zedong's three phases of insurgency, the LTTE achieved remarkable battlefield success against the SLAF.³⁹ By developing a hybrid force structure that was able to seize and hold key terrain in the northern and eastern provinces while controlling the surrounding waterways, the Tamil Tigers were able to challenge militarily the conventional forces of the Sri Lankan state for nearly a quarter-century. Over time, however, the LTTE neither developed a revolutionary army capable of defeating the SLAF in open battle during phase three nor succeeded in finding a political settlement to the conflict. Rather than revert to the second phase once the Sri Lankans clearly gained the initiative during Eelam War IV, the LTTE forged ahead to achieve its political aim.

Like many violent non-state actors, the LTTE used the four tenets of insurgency - provocation, intimidation, protraction and exhaustion - in an attempt to defeat a national army.⁴⁰ During Eelam War IV, however, Prabhakaran chose a conventional force posture to defend terrain, massing his overmatched forces in space rather than in time while discounting changes to the conflict environment. In doing so, Prabhakaran gave the GoSL an opening to exploit once the latter developed the capacity to crush the LTTE on the battlefield. With no appetite for a political solution, the Tamil Tigers chief asset, Velupillai Prabhakaran, also became its chief liability. Failing to implement a contingency plan, Velupillai Prabhakaran and 250 of his most trusted associates including several members of his immediate family were gunned down in the

³⁹ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*.

⁴⁰ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

insurgency's final moments in a fierce 22-hour gunfight that culminated in an eleventh-hour escape attempt near the group's historic stronghold of Mullaithivu.⁴¹

CHAPTER II: REVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS

Defined

The concept of “revolutions in military affairs” was developed by U.S. defense guru Andrew Marshall during the late 1980s to describe major changes or trends in warfare.⁴² Through the expansion of a previously conceived but thin Soviet model on how new technologies, concepts of operation and organizational structures impact the ways in which wars are fought, Marshall launched a new era in defense analysis and planning.⁴³ “A Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA,” says RAND defense analyst Peter Wilson, “is a ‘way of war’ which has a spectrum of features that include new technology, new modes of production and of human mobilization, new doctrines or concepts of use of the technology, new organizations with advocates, and new training and education.”⁴⁴ Over time, these variables combine to create a break from the status quo, forming an alternate RMA that interacts with, but does not replace, previous ways of war (RMAs). RMAs are then employed synergistically to deter, counter or neutralize an adversary in a measure-countermeasure dynamic of warfare.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam institutionalized several RMAs with great success over three decades. Evolving from a one-dimensional ragtag militant group capable only of conducting hit-and-run style guerrilla and terrorist attacks into a hybrid military organization capable of conducting well-coordinated joint operations across the guerrilla-conventional

⁴¹ B. Muralidhar Reddy, “Final Hours: An eyewitness account of the last 70 hours of Eelam War IV,” *Frontline* 26 No. 12 (06-19 June 2009).

⁴² Peter Wilson, *Revolutions in Military Affairs*, 6.

⁴³ Senior Soviet military leadership coined the term ‘military technological revolution’ (MTR) to describe three transitions to war that had emerged during the 20th century: self-propelled fighting vehicles; the development and deployment of nuclear weapons and their means of long-range delivery; and the emerging changes associated with information technology-enabled surveillance, communications and precision guided weapons.

⁴⁴ Peter Wilson, *Revolutions in Military Affairs*, 7.

continuum, the Tamil Tigers exemplified the revolution in military affairs for a non-state actor. The most impressive feature of the LTTE was its ability to develop or acquire new technologies, absorb them into their concepts of operation and then rapidly apply them onto the battlefield. In addition to its large territorial holdings in the predominately Tamil northern and eastern regions of the island, the rise of the LTTE, both politically and militarily, was made possible by an extensive network of fund-raisers, political and propaganda officers and arms procurers operating among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. An archetype for future conflicts, the twenty-six year insurgency in Sri Lanka illustrates a case study where a non-state actor supported by a well-resourced diaspora succeeded in leveling the playing field militarily with a weak state.

Since World War I, there have been four revolutions in military affairs.⁴⁵ The first RMA emerged in 1914 with the arrival of the mass-produced mobile fighting vehicle including armored vehicles, aircraft, submarines and war ships. The second RMA, the strategy of the insurgent - or Mao's three phases of insurgency - emerged in the 1930s as a response to superior RMA-I capabilities. Ten years later, the third RMA emerged with the acquisition and development of nuclear weapons and long-range means of bombardment. And finally, in the mid-1950s, the fourth RMA emerged with the development of precision guided or "silicon-enabled" warfare. In the true sense of hybrid warfare, the Tamil Tigers developed the skills and discipline to sequence large-scale battalion sized mobile assaults with precision indirect fire and sophisticated small unit operations such as targeted assassinations, raids and suicide bombings. Together, the LTTE employed elements of RMAs I-IV with lethal effect on the GoSL for over three decades.

In Sri Lanka, protracted hybrid warfare between the LTTE and the GoSL showcased the measure-countermeasure dynamic of the four RMAs at the operational and strategic levels of

⁴⁵ The author uses an RMA framework outlined by Peter Wilson and Paul Davis in *The Impending Crisis in Defense Planning: Colliding RMAs Necessitate a New Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010) to explore the twenty-six secessionist insurgency between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Government of Sri Lanka.

war. For most of the insurgency's lifecycle, the tools and techniques associated with RMAs-I, II and IV proved an effective counter to an SLAF equipped with mediocre RMA-I and IV capabilities. To render ineffective certain RMA-I capabilities of the SLAF, the Tamil Tigers employed hybrid warfare including a lethal mix of conventional and guerrilla forces. Moreover, the Tigers mastered the use of subversive activities both on the island and through its global diaspora, quickly gaining a reputation as one of the world's most sophisticated and lethal insurgent forces.

RMA-I: Sea and Air Tigers

The LTTE then supplemented their land-based hybrid force with RMA-I capabilities including by forming a maritime wing, the Sea Tigers, and - two decades later - a small air wing, the Air Tigers. The Sea Tigers' operational responsibility was to disrupt the mobility of the Sri Lanka Navy while ensuring the safe passage of armaments and other vital provisions. By developing an indigenous industrial manufacturing base to support the assembly of a dozen different types of watercraft, and by equipping them with sophisticated communications and encryption equipment, radar and Global Positioning Systems (GPS), the Sea Tigers were able to challenge or neutralize the littoral capabilities of the SLN and to keep open its vital sea lanes of communication and supply.⁴⁶ According to maritime piracy and terrorism expert Martin Murphy, "while most other maritime insurgency groups perform two tasks - carrying out raids and delivering supplies covertly - the LTTE engaged in the additional tasks of ship protection and temporary sea control, both functions of a conventional navy."⁴⁷ Reaching a high-water mark of

⁴⁶ Martin Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 June 2006).

⁴⁷ Martin Murphy, "Maritime Threat," 2.

nearly 3,000 trained personnel, and 100-200 surface and underwater vehicles, the maritime innovation of the Sea Tigers was revolutionary for a non-state actor.⁴⁸

Due to the large swathes of territory and coastline under its control in the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern regions of the country, the LTTE had near complete maritime freedom of movement in the waters surrounding Sri Lanka including the 22 miles separating the island with the coast of India's southern province Tamil Nadu. As such, the LTTE built scores of sea bases and ports from which they launched guerrilla maritime operations against the SLN. The permissive environment allowed the LTTE to develop a range of sea-based capabilities including Blue-, Brown- and Green-water navies containing elements of RMAs I, II and IV.⁴⁹ It wasn't until the SLN enhanced its littoral warfare capabilities through, for example, the development of its Rapid Action Boat Squadron (RABS) in 2002-2003 that the SLN began developing the countermeasure to LTTE wolfpack, cluster and suicide swarming tactics. Though generally associated with RMA-IV, these methods also contain elements of RMAs I and II, including maritime guerrilla warfare and deception.⁵⁰ In essence, the SLN countered the swarming tactics of the Sea Tigers with counter-swarming tactics but on a much larger scale. In a classic measure-countermeasure dynamic of RMA-I and RMA-IV, a combination of faster boats, better equipment and overwhelming firepower ultimately overwhelmed the capacity of the Sea Tigers.

Adding a third dimension to its warfighting kit, the Tamil Tigers also employed a rudimentary air capability of up to six Czech-built Zlin Z-143 single-engine light aircraft with

⁴⁸ Rohan Gunaratna, "Sea Tiger Success Threatens the Spread of Copycat Tactics," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 March 2001).

⁴⁹ The LTTE's maritime wing, the Sea Tigers, were comprised of a blue water navy, with ocean-going cargo vessels and floating warehouses, a brown water navy for operating on the rivers inland and a green water navy for coastal operations. Green and blue water navies consisted of several types of attack craft. See Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare," 468.

⁵⁰ Sergei Desilva-Ranasinghe, "Lessons in Maritime Counter-Insurgency," *Asia Pacific Defense Reporter* 35 No. 10 (January 2009 - December 2010).

modified undercarriage and cockpit to drop bombs on designated targets.⁵¹ The development and use of RMA-I air capabilities was a direct benefit of having a large diaspora to tap into for weapons procurement and funding. According to Asia defense expert Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, “the development of the Air Tigers could not have occurred if not for the significant funding, networks and expertise that the LTTE could access among its supporters in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.”⁵² The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora again enabled the LTTE to acquire and absorb new technologies, and apply them into concepts of operations in lightning speed. After several years of preparation including the construction of several paved airstrips, the Air Tigers conducted their maiden attack in April 2007, striking the Kattunayake air base. While largely symbolic, the addition of an RMA-I air capability had a profound impact on the credibility of the Sri Lankan government, including by disrupting the tourism industry and other economic hubs. From 2007-2009, the Air Tigers conducted 9 raids on various military and civilian targets, leaving 19 dead and over one-hundred wounded, but having a much more important psychological effect on the GoSL.⁵³

RMA-II: Maoist Warfare and Black Tigers

In response to adversaries who could not compete in RMA-I warfare, or wanted to enhance an RMA-I capability, RMA-II emerged as the strategy of the insurgent. Akin to Mao’s three phases of insurgency, and to what U.S. military forces have faced recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, this way of guerrilla warfare, including coercive terrorism and subversion, was used extensively and to great effect by the Tamil Tigers. Although subversion is often seen as a form of ‘non-violent terrorism,’ the LTTE employed what scholar William Rosenau called a

⁵¹ Iqbal Athas, “LTTE Conducts Air Raids over Mannar and Colombo,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly* (30 October 2008).

⁵² Sergei Desilva-Ranasinghe, “Insurgent AirPower and Counter-Terrorism.” *Defense Review Asia* 3 No. 5 (July-August 2009).

⁵³ Sergei Desilva-Ranasinghe, “Insurgent AirPower and Counter-Terrorism.”

“double-edged sword, with subversion forming one edge, and the ‘armed struggle’ the other.”⁵⁴

The LTTE thus employed the full spectrum of Maoist RMA-II capabilities as both a standalone way of war and as a hybrid with quantities of both RMA-I and RMA-IV. While this approach to warfare is not new, its mastery by a non-state actor was.

The Tamil Tigers augmented their RMA-II capabilities by developing a lethal suicide wing known as the Black Tigers. Fascinated with the second and third order effects created by Hezbollah’s bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, Velupillai Prabhakaran saw suicide bombing as an effective tool with which to cow the GoSL.⁵⁵ Four years later, in May 1987, the Tamil Tigers deployed a suicide car bombing as the first wave of a multi-pronged assault on a SLAF headquarters in Nelliady. Due to the tactical and psychological impact of the attack that reportedly killed over 100 soldiers, a wave of panic and fear set in across the country.⁵⁶ Aware of both the kinetic and propaganda value of this RMA-II technique, Velupillai Prabhakaran developed a martyr cult centered on the Tamil-Hindu perception of victimization at the hands of the Sinhalese-Buddhist dominated government.

Constantly innovating in the military realm, the LTTE developed the suicide vest to bypass improved security controls implemented by the GoSL.⁵⁷ This classic tactical measure-countermeasure dynamic is a constant in warfare, but especially so in irregular wars in which non-state actors aren’t wedded to doctrine and innovation takes place in a matter of days and weeks, not months and years. With the invention of the hyper-mobile suicide vest, the Black Tigers carried out suicide attacks against hard-to-reach targets including high profile government and military officials, military facilities, critical national infrastructure and other economic and

⁵⁴ William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency*, 5.

⁵⁵ Bruce Hoffman and Gordon McCormick, “Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 No. 4 (2004):250; Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 195.

⁵⁶ Daya Somasundaram, “Suicide Bombers of Sri Lanka,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010): 417.

⁵⁷ Jackson et al., *Breaching the Fortress Wall: Understanding Terrorist Efforts to Overcome Defensive Technologies*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), 68.

urban targets of opportunity in order to gain leverage over the Sri Lankan state. The Black Tigers went on to conduct nearly as many suicide attacks as every Middle Eastern group combined during a twenty-year period ending in 2003.⁵⁸

The highly dedicated and lethal suicide arm of the LTTE intimidated the Sri Lankan state and acted as deterrent against any Tamil political opposition. To fill its ranks, the Tamil Tigers recruited females to serve in the elite ‘Black Tigresses.’ Their impact was significant. For example, female suicide cadre were used in the assassination of two heads of state, former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993.⁵⁹ The use of female suicide bombers and the development of the suicide vest highlight a case in which military innovation changes operational concepts in the context of RMA-II. More than application, though, the development of the suicide vest is also a case study in military diffusion, or what Everett Rogers describes as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system.”⁶⁰ In this instance, the social system is the community of armed non-state actors. Through what scholar Mike Horowitz calls “indirect diffusion,” the LTTE’s microinnovation, the suicide vest, soon spread to other Islamic groups including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.⁶¹

Organized initially as a land-based unit, LTTE martyr squads eventually integrated into the Sea Tigers. During the conflict, Sea Tigers employed swarming tactics in an attempt to create an opening in which a Black Sea Tiger attack craft could ram an explosive laden boat into a larger Sri Lankan Navy vessel. With a policy of selective recruitment followed by an intense training regimen, Black Tiger personnel, on land and sea, were highly disciplined in target

⁵⁸ Stephen Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002,” in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 50; Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power*, 195.

⁵⁹ Christine C. Fair, *Urban Battle Fields of South Asia: Lessons Learned from Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2004), 37-41.

⁶⁰ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003), 11.

⁶¹ Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power*, 170, 197.

selection. Moreover, the specialized training of the Black Tigers was consistent with the character of Velupillai Prabhakaran - commitment, clarity of mind, skill, and effective C2. According to RAND defense expert Peter Chalk, “Involving thoroughly trained cadres who have proven their ability to act decisively on land and sea, and incorporating innovative methods to defeat government counter-measures, it is these tactics that have arguably become one of the most infamous hallmarks of the Tamil ethno-nationalist war in Sri Lanka.”⁶² Black Tiger recruits were also required to wear sodium or potassium cyanide capsules around their necks for consumption in case of imminent capture.⁶³ In the early phases of the conflict, suicide cadres were selected for training after they joined the broader movement, usually for some altruistic belief of safeguarding their threatened ethnic identity.⁶⁴ By Eelam War IV, however, the Tamil Tigers had largely lost the support of the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamil population which in turn led to more coercive recruitment and fundraising practices.

Subversion through the Diaspora

An exhaustive analysis of the LTTE will bring to bear significant attention on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora that began fleeing the once idyllic Indian Ocean nation after the departure of the British colonialists opened the door for discriminatory policies against the minority Tamil population. From an insurgency viewpoint, the 1983 and 1987 ethnic riots against the Sri Lankan Tamils served two purposes for the LTTE. Foremost, the incidents helped link the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora - the fundamental component of the insurgency’s financial, propaganda and procurement strategy - to a cause. Second it helped heighten what were already significant tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities. Not only did the riots radicalize the ethnic Sri Lankan Tamil population by driving a wedge between the majority and

⁶² Peter Chalk, “Tigers Evolve - The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's Developing Suicide Attack Methods,” *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 March 2007).

⁶³ Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis & National Security*, 110.

⁶⁴ R.A. Hudson, *Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why: The 1999 Government Report on Profiling Terrorists* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2000), 139.

minority communities, it also allowed the LTTE to exploit the brutality that Sri Lankan Tamils or their close family members had been exposed to by the Sinhalese. “Because most of the members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora still have family members in Sri Lanka and because most have at least one family member (however near or remote) killed, raped, or tortured in the war,” says Southeast Asia expert Christine Fair, “the diasporan Tamils have a strong distrust of Colombo.”⁶⁵ The powerful Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is the key factor that afforded the LTTE the ability to engage in hybrid warfare against the GoSL.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam used subversion extensively through its Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to advance its cause. Due to violence directed at Sri Lankan Tamils in the 1980s by the Sinhalese-dominated majority, nearly 500,000 refugees fled Sri Lanka for Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia, South Africa, and several European countries.⁶⁶ After settling in friendly host-nation countries, the LTTE set up offices and cells to support the war effort. Reporting through Velupillai Prabhakaran’s hierarchical C2 structure, local officers organized the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, establishing a global infrastructure to develop and maintain political and diplomatic support, raise funds and procure weapons and equipment by selling the promise of an independent Tamil Eelam.⁶⁷ Remarkably “the LTTE is known to have a presence in over 44 countries,” says counterterrorism expert Shanaka Jayasekara, “in which it has a structured presence in 12 top-level contributing countries” such as England, Canada, Australia and the United States.⁶⁸

With access to the growing Tamil diaspora, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam developed an extensive global network that used both persuasive and coercive techniques to

⁶⁵ Christine Fair, “Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies,” 139.

⁶⁶ Cécile Van de Voorde, “Sri Lankan Terrorism: Assessing and Responding to the Threat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” *Police Practice and Research* 6, No. 2 (May 2005):191.

⁶⁷ Shanaka Jayasekara, “LTTE Fundraising & Money Transfer Operations,” Paper Presented at the International Conference on Countering Terrorism (October 2007). See also Byman et al., 43-49.

⁶⁸ Shanaka Jayasekara, “LTTE Fundraising,” 1-2.

achieve its end. To shape the public opinion of both the diaspora and the host-nations in which they lived and operated, the LTTE combined propaganda elements of RMA-II with the exploitation of the communications tools and techniques associated with RMA-IV. This toolkit included the dissemination of propaganda through mass media vehicles including the Internet (e.g. tamiltigers.net and pro-LTTE news website TamilNet) and the 'Voice of Tigers' FM radio and television stations but also through more traditional methods such as posters, billboards, dedicated telephone hotlines, community libraries and mailings. It also propagated recordings of battles and commentaries on military victories by producing and disseminating sophisticated videos, CDs and DVDs and employed rumors and malicious campaigning against the GoSL.⁶⁹

Although accounts vary, the large Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is suspected of providing somewhere close to \$300 million a year, though more conservative estimates exist, in funding for the war effort.⁷⁰ Over the last 15 years, the development of combat and subversive capabilities, along with the combination of new and old methods, enabled the LTTE to operate effectively both in physical and virtual space. The subversive component of the Tamil Tigers - especially its use of front organizations to raise funds, disseminate messages and harass its critics - was arguably even more impressive than its combat capabilities. With a loyal, dedicated and battle-tested cadre, a sanctuary in the northern and eastern provinces and a global diaspora providing external funding, propaganda and procurement assistance, the LTTE was able to challenge the military dominance of the Sri Lankan state. By some estimates, nearly one-quarter of all Sri Lankan Tamils currently live abroad with the more privileged diaspora residing in Canada, Britain, the United States, France and Australia.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (August 2010).

⁷⁰ B. C. Tan and John Solomon, "Feeding the Tiger - How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 September 2007).

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch, *Funding the Final War: LTTE Intimidation and Extortion in the Tamil Diaspora* (NY: Human Rights Watch, 14 Mar 2006), 1.

RMA's III and IV

RMA-III, which took form during World War II as a response to RMA-I, is the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range means of bombardment, as well as their related technology enablers that have become more visible with advances in RMA-IV. Having conducted the first non-state use of a chemical weapon in warfare by using chlorine gas in an assault on a Sri Lankan military post in East Kiran in 1990, the Tamil Tigers engaged, if only briefly, in more recent mass-destruction RMA-I or RMA-III capabilities.⁷² The fourth RMA, the strategy of information technology (IT), centers on IT enablers including precision-guided weapons and other silicon-enabled technologies. The Tamil Tigers acquired RMA-IV offensive capabilities such as infrared surface-to-air missiles and Russian Made SA-14 Stela-3, man-portable air defense missile system (MANPADS) which they used to bring down two Sri Lankan transport planes and a helicopter gunship during the 1990s.⁷³

The very dramatic and rapid transformation of sensing technology associated with RMA-IV's space-based communications architectures allowed the Tamil Tigers to communicate effectively on the battlefield, and to use Internet cable television and high bandwidth satellite transmissions for subversive and propaganda purposes with its diaspora. One of the most important key enablers of RMA-IV is the emergence of an increasingly effective satellite array of navigation enabling systems. With experienced and highly trained Tiger cadre both on land and at sea, RMA-IV-based technologies such as NavStar and GPS allowed the Tamil Tigers to target enemy assets and personnel on the battlefield and to navigate the seas for resupply and procurement purposes. In one case of RMA-IV reverse engineering, the Tamil Tigers gained access to an unused transponder on a satellite, Intelsat 12, and used it to disseminate propaganda

⁷² Bruce Hoffman, "The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare," 465.

⁷³ Jackson et al., *Breaching the Fortress Wall*, 78.

into Sri Lankan homes.⁷⁴ The swarming tactics employed by the LTTE's maritime wing, the Sea Tigers, are another new type of operation emerging out of RMA-IV that combines to lethal consequence with components of RMAs I and II.⁷⁵

The theory of revolutions in military affairs is about competition between ways of war that interact, collide and overpower others, but not replace them.⁷⁶ The LTTE's remarkable - albeit ultimately self-defeating - transition from irregular to conventional warfare includes the development of RMA-I type capabilities, and the mastery of sophisticated RMA-II tactics and the absorption of RMA-IV technologies. Yet it was the seduction of a hybrid force structure and an increasingly unattainable aim that led Prabhakaran's Tigers down the path to defeat. Before its rout, though, the LTTE was a formidable adversary that combined the agility and flexibility of an irregular enemy with the power and technology of a state actor. Backed by a full range of combat and subversive capabilities, Velupillai Prabhakaran remained fixed on the group's original aim - creating an independent Tamil Eelam homeland - through a military solution while largely discounting the political implications of changes in the conflict environment during Eelam War IV.

CHAPTER III: CONFLICT TYPE

Secessionist Insurgency - and Defeat

Notwithstanding the glaring differences between the secessionist insurgency-cum-civil war in Sri Lanka and the types of insurgencies in which the United States has recently been involved as a third-party acting on behalf of a host-nation, the proper identification of conflict type is key to understanding the ways in which both parties linked ends and means in pursuit of their strategic objectives during Eelam War IV. Given that the LTTE remained fixated on

⁷⁴ Aviation Week & Space Technology, "Talk like a Pirate," 166: 15 (16 April 2007); Eleanor Keymer, "Plugging the Gap: Securing Military Satellite Systems," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (31 August 2010).

⁷⁵ Paul K. Davis and Peter A. Wilson, *The Impending Crisis in Defense Planning*, 3-6.

⁷⁶ Paul K. Davis and Peter A. Wilson, *The Impending Crisis in Defense Planning*, 3-6.

creating an independent homeland in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces for over three decades, but that Velupillai Prabhakaran chose to hold terrain in conventional set piece battles against superior forces during Eelam War IV, the conflict type, and the RMAs employed by the Tamil Tigers are critical to this study.

According to U.S. military doctrine, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.⁷⁷ In essence, an insurgency is a competition to control political space or as counterinsurgency theorist Sir Robert Thompson understood it, a "competition for government."⁷⁸ Yet to understand the conflict in Sri Lanka this way would miss the broader point: the underlying political nature of the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle is a secessionist movement with deep roots in partisan warfare or RMA-II that evolved into a hybrid warfighting machine. However, the LTTE was not trying to subvert or overthrow the Sri Lankan government island-wide but to secede from it in its northern and eastern regions. As a specific form of insurgency, the conflict is more like the secession and formation of the southern Confederate states during the American Civil War than the recent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his seminal work *Insurgency and Terrorism*, Bard E. O'Neil posits a typology of nine insurgencies based on the ultimate goals of and politics surrounding each group that can be used to identify key distinctions among the various types. According to O'Neil, Tamil insurgents are best described as secessionists, who "renounce and seek to withdraw from the political community (state) of which they are formally a part."⁷⁹ The LTTE controlled territory and ran

⁷⁷ U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (US Army Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5), 1st Publication. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

⁷⁸ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966).

⁷⁹ Bard O'Neil, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Potomac Books Inc., 2005), 24-25.

hybrid institutions funded in part by the GoSL but did not attempt to outgovern the Sri Lankan state outside those areas already under its control. Prabhakaran's Tigers wanted only to be perceived as a legitimate actor among ethnic Sri Lankan Tamils. Towards the end, Prabhakaran used a range of persuasive and coercive tools and techniques on both the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils and their diaspora. Over time, however, the legitimacy of the Tamil Tigers faded as they grew more desperate - and support was gained only through coercive activities. Although the LTTE's territorial holdings and support fluctuated with the ebb and flow of the campaign, the original political aim of succeeding from the Sri Lankan state remained a constant throughout the conflict.

While a secessionist insurgency is therefore an appropriate framework through which to analyze the conflict from the side of the Tamil insurgent, counterinsurgency, at least in the western population-centric sense, is not the best context for understanding the actions of the state. What occurred in Sri Lanka between the GoSL and the Tamil Tigers was much more of a civil war between two territorially defined combatants, not a counterinsurgency waged against guerrillas. Similar to the Israeli approach in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, there was no attempt by the GoSL to win the hearts and minds of the Tamils. Nor did it attempt to reestablish government authority in Tamil-controlled areas or reengineer large segments of Tamil society. That the Tamil population did not support the GoSL during Eelam War IV was largely irrelevant to the outcome of the conflict.

The Sri Lankan government's final victory was therefore not a population - centric COIN success but a fairly classic kinetic campaign across clearly identified battlelines. As former Australian Army officer and counterinsurgency expert Dr. David Kilcullen notes, however, "Counterinsurgency is, simply, whatever governments do to defeat rebellions."⁸⁰ In Eelam War

⁸⁰ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 2.

IV, government forces seized and held terrain throughout Tamil strongholds by employing a combination of overwhelming RMA-I and RMA-IV capabilities to defeat the LTTEs lethal mix of RMA-I, RMA-II and RMA-IV measures. It was a classic measure-countermeasure dynamic that combined new ways of wars with old ones. Although both sides employed conventional and irregular tactics on the battlefield, the defeat of the Tamil Tigers was due largely to having remained fixated on an increasingly infeasible political aim - an independent Eelam homeland gained through violent means alone - despite significant changes in the conflict environment.

By contrast, the SLAF adapted its strategy to reflect fluid circumstances. For example, “attrition, and not territory,” was the initial goal of the GoSL during Eelam War IV; however, when it became evident that the Tamil Tigers could no longer hold key terrain, the SLAF changed its political and military strategic aims by setting its sight on the total destruction of the LTTE and its key leadership.⁸¹ By the time Prabhakaran realized that the SLAF had finally mingled the right mix of political will, strategy and resources into newly improved combined ways of war, his fate and that of the Tamil Tigers had been determined. In the end, no amount of RMA-II or RMA-IV combat, propaganda and mass communication tactics and techniques could counter the SLAFs effective and overwhelming use of RMA-I, II and IV capabilities. In the end, Prabhakaran’s Tigers were outgunned by a superior conventional Sri Lankan military that also developed RMA-II capabilities at the low end of the guerrilla-conventional spectrum. While the RMAs are a good framework within which to analyze the conflict, the key to understanding the outcome is to unpack the RMAs in order to identify the individual, state and systemic factors that enabled both parties to employ various ways of war to deter, neutralize or defeat an adversary. Given the fluid nature of the post 9/11 conflict environment, it is important to chart the external factors that most impacted the outcome of Eelam War IV.

⁸¹ Ashok Mehta, “Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won,” *Manekshaw Paper* (New Delhi: Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 22 November 2010): 9-11.

CHAPTER IV: IDIOSYNCRASIES

The 1st Image

The demise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is attributed to myriad factors, some more persuasive than others, ranging from the idiosyncrasies of Prabhakaran himself, the superiority of RMAs employed during Eelam War IV, to more structural reasons related to the conflict environment. While evidence suggests that Prabhakaran's totalitarian stranglehold on the LTTE, the Sri Lankan Tamil population and the diaspora impacted severely the ways in which the conflict was fought, most scholars tend to ignore the role of personal idiosyncrasies and human error in determining the trajectory of international relations including the secessionist insurgency in Sri Lanka.⁸² As such, leadership and human behavior, central issues to the study of security studies and war, have been least studied by academics and military professionals. Yet the destruction of the Tamil Tigers as an organized military force and the decapitation of its leadership structure is largely the result of decisions made by two men, Velupillai Prabhakaran and his counterpart Sri Lankan President Mahinda. Though those decisions were impacted by changes in the conflict environment, they were not determined by them and the outcome in Eelam War IV was by no means inevitable.

Too often political scientists and other academics discount the role that individuals play in international relations, instead positing that relations between states are based predominately on structural or system theories. In *Man, the State and War*, prominent IR theorist Kenneth Waltz attempts to understand the causes of international war through three levels of analysis or 'images' including human nature, the internal organization of nation-states and the relative position of nations in an anarchic international system.⁸³ In his first image, which is rooted in the

⁸² Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Let us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25 No. 4 (Spring 2001): 108.

⁸³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: a Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

innate qualities of humans, Waltz concludes that human nature indeed plays a role in the origins of conflict but swiftly rejects it as an effective tool for analyzing the causes of international conflict.⁸⁴ Yet even a superficial analysis of the conflict in Sri Lanka suggests that LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran was both the single most important factor in sustaining the twenty-six year secessionist insurgency, and the primary factor for the collapse of what was arguably once the world's most sophisticated non-state military organization.

In their 2001 article, 'Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,' Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack dispute parts of Waltz's claim, especially his view of human nature as a constant, "an ineffable quality shared among all humans."⁸⁵ Rather Byman and Pollack argue that because human nature is a variable, the role individuals play in international relations is much more pronounced than is generally assumed. In the case of Sri Lanka's violent ethnic conflict, the causes of conflict are multifactoral with large behavior components. As such, the outcome of the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and government of Sri Lanka cannot be understood without considering the idiosyncrasies and judgments of Prabhakaran or for that matter Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother Gotabhaya, the defense secretary. Their personalities undoubtedly shaped the outcome of the conflict including the ways of war (RMAs) employed by each during Eelam War IV, as much if not greater than any other changes in the conflict environment. In Sri Lanka, however, military failure was more a result of poor decisions made by Velupillai Prabhakaran than judicious choices made by Mahinda Rajapaksa.

⁸⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, 16, 80-81, 224-238.

⁸⁵ Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Let us Now Praise Great Men," 112.

Military Misfortune, Doubtful

In the military sense, the Tamil Tigers experienced a catastrophe in which they failed to learn, anticipate and adapt in a fluid conflict environment.⁸⁶ As expected in combat that ends militarily, the outcome was an annihilation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that shocked even Antoine-Henri Jomini's most fervent admirers.⁸⁷ In *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* Eliot Cohen and John Gooch argue that misfortune "happens because of an inability to cope with unfolding events...adaptive failures suggest an inability to handle the changing present."⁸⁸ Throughout Eelam War IV, Velupillai Prabhakaran demonstrated an inability to implement a strategy based on changes in the conflict environment whereas his rival, Mahinda Rajapaksa, did not. However, Cohen and Gooch's thoughtful analysis contains an inherent contradiction by rejecting what they term "The Man on the Dock" phenomenon, which attempts to explain military failure in terms of human error.⁸⁹ According to this interpretation, with which both authors disagree "catastrophe occurs because one man - almost invariably the commander - commits unpardonable errors of judgment."⁹⁰

Regardless of the improved capacity and capabilities of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, any understanding of the conflict in Sri Lanka turns Cohen and Gooch's hypothesis on its head. It was Prabhakaran who chose to defend key terrain in fixed conventional battles with inferior forces, even after his sea lines of communication and resupply had been neutralized, rather than revert to a more limited RMA-II way of war. It was Prabhakaran who chose to subordinate the political to the military, seeking a military solution to what was essentially a political problem

⁸⁶ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 27.

⁸⁷ Jomini's principle of annihilation emphasized the destruction of an enemy's force as the key to victory. See John Shy, "Jomini," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁸⁸ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, 27.

⁸⁹ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, 6.

⁹⁰ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, 6.

while misjudging the intentions and capabilities of the GoSL. It was Prabhakaran who ordered his men to hole up on a tiny beach head near Mullaithivu and then attempt to escape while surrounded by over 100,000 Sri Lankan troops. Finally it was Prabhakaran whose final decision resulted in his own death, in the deaths of his entire immediate family and 250 of his top lieutenants and ultimately in the collapse of an entire secessionist movement.

Meanwhile, but to a lesser degree, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa used his office to mobilize the resources and political will of a nation. It was Rajapaksa who refused to reach a political settlement, having been duped one too many times by Prabhakaran. It was Rajapaksa who ignored numerous calls for a ceasefire by the international community while his armed forces executed a military strategy of leadership decapitation. In the case of the LTTE, catastrophe occurred because one man, Velupillai Prabhakaran, ignored the political implications of changes to the conflict environment while his rival, Mahinda Rajapaksa, exploited them. Though other factors also contributed to the destruction of the LTTE as a military force, none were as significant as Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Misperceptions

To scholars focusing on organizational learning, the decisions made by Velupillai Prabhakaran, while disastrous, may not be all that surprising. When outcomes are uncertain, organizations, like individuals, are likely to repeat past decisions based on the outcome of past experiences.⁹¹ Given the prior successes of the Tamil Tigers on and off the battlefield, Velupillai Prabhakaran most likely envisioned a situation in which the international community again stepped in to negotiate a ceasefire. Like past ceasefires, this would have allowed the LTTE to rearm, refit and recuperate while they planned out the next phase of the conflict. Since reassessing expectations on the basis of new information is, without question, inherently

⁹¹ James G. March, Lee S. Sproull and Michal Tamuz, "Learning From Samples of One or Fewer," In *Organization Learning* eds. Michael D. Cohen and Lee S. Sproull (London: SAGE, 1996).

difficult, it is hard to imagine a scenario where Prabhakaran stepped back to reconsider his underlying expectations. From both an organizational and an individual perspective, the notion of Velupillai Prabhakaran forgoing the prestige of hybrid force structure, instead reverting back to a Maoist phase two, or RMA II-centric posture, seems almost non-sensical. Given the dwindling indigenous Sri Lankan Tamil support for the LTTE, it may have been a non-starter as well.

For Velupillai Prabhakaran, the aim of an independent Tamil Eelam was non-negotiable. For Mahinda Rajapaksa, reaching a political settlement while Prabhakaran was still operating freely in Sri Lanka became unthinkable. Yet even after changes in the conflict environment suggested the increasing unlikelihood of achieving their original end, Prabhakaran's Tigers persisted. According to political scientist Robert Jervis, the tendency to ignore or misperceive conflicting information "is greater the more ambiguous the information, the more confident the actor is of [the] validity of his image, and the greater his commitment to the established view."⁹² Seduced by past success, Velupillai Prabhakaran ignored or misperceived incomplete information on the political implications of changes to the conflict environment.

Meanwhile, he remaining fixated on achieving a separate homeland for the Sri Lankan Tamil population. "When a policy has brought notable success, actors are likely to apply it to a range of later situations," notes Jervis, "Because the actor is apt to overestimate the degree to which his policy was responsible for the earlier success...he will be especially insensitive to variation in the situation."⁹³ For this reason, Velupillai Prabhakaran was unable to filter reports suggesting the weakness of the Tamil Tigers compared to the newfound capacity and political will of the SLAF.

⁹² Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 195.

⁹³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 278.

To understand the interplay between different ways of way employed by the LTTE, one must consider the impact that Velupillai Prabhakaran and Mahinda Rajapaksa had on the RMAs or ways of war employed by both sides during Eelam War IV. Both sides chosen RMA or combination thereof during this phase are reflective of the idiosyncrasies of the respective leaders and of their past successes and failures on the battlefield. In this sense, it is important to think of the tension between various RMAs as a push-pull relationship rather than something binary.

In an attempt to repel the main SLAF thrusts into the eastern and then northern provinces in Eelam War IV, the LTTE adapted a defensive force posture that weighed heavily on the conventional side of the spectrum while the SLAF employed an increasingly sophisticated maneuver force comprising capabilities from RMAs-I, II and IV. This mix of SLAF tools and techniques included Special Infantry Operations Teams (SIOTS) and small units of the Special Forces Regiment (SFR) to infiltrate into LTTE-controlled areas.⁹⁴ During Eelam War IV, however, the SLAF employed better unconventional skills as the Tamil Tigers lost the capacity to wage effective guerrilla warfare by moving most of its skilled guerrillas into conventional roles. The strategy of attrition was working as RMA-I and RMA-II measures of the LTTE were routed by RMA-I and RMA-IV countermeasures of the SLAF. With past operational successes including battalion sized assaults on the SLAF, Prabhakaran assumed incorrectly that his hybrid force structure could achieve victory along a traditional Maoist phase three path.

CHAPTER V: CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT

LTTE Defection

The most significant change to the post-9/11 conflict environment since the Norwegian-brokered Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) in 2002 was the April 2004 split between the LTTE's

⁹⁴ Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, "'Determined, Dared and Done:' The Special Forces Regiment," *Defence Review Asia* 3, No. 8 (December 2009-January 2010).

northern command led by Velupillai Prabhakaran and its eastern division led by Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan aka Colonel Karuna. His departure was a consequence of a long-standing feud between northern and eastern Tamil castes that included sharp disagreements over the LTTE's relationship with and treatment of local Tamils in the east and the north.⁹⁵ Karuna's departure and reconciliation with the government finally put a crack in the LTTE armor as it lost a long-time trusted advisor of Prabhakaran. Not only did Karuna's defection cost the LTTE tangibly through the loss of one of its best and most experienced commanders in the east as well as the skill and experience of 3,000 battle-hardened guerrilla forces, it also cost the Tamil Tigers intangibly through the loss of legitimacy among Sri Lankan Tamils including the diaspora.⁹⁶ The loss of Colonel Karuna is one of several environmental factors that impacted the ways of war both sides employed during Eelam War IV. Along with Karuna, the LTTE lost various propaganda and combat capabilities associated with RMA-II. This factor should have but did not change the political or military calculus of Prabhakaran.

With Karuna's defection, Prabhakaran could no longer claim to be the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamils, which in turn exacerbated the existing recruiting and fundraising challenges facing the LTTE in the east and elsewhere. Despite denying any collaboration with the SLAF, Karuna participated directly and indirectly throughout Eelam War IV, providing tactical and strategic intelligence on the operations, location and structure of the Tamil Tigers, and commanding operations including in the initial salvo during which government forces fought pitched battles against the LTTE to lift the siege of the water channel in Mavil Aru.⁹⁷ Despite a systematic and successful attempt to purge the traitorous faction from the east, Prabhakaran's strategy in Eelam War IV never reflected the significance of this loss. The tactical loss of Karuna turned into a strategic disaster for the Tamil Tigers as the GoSL now possessed significant

⁹⁵ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1028.

⁹⁶ Chris Smith, "The Eelam Endgame?" *International Affairs* 83, No. 1 (2007): 70.

⁹⁷ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1038.

RMA-II capabilities associated with Karuna's battle-hardened guerrilla force but was never reflected in the RMAs employed by Prabhakaran.

2005 Election of President Mahinda Rajapaksa

The election of President Mahinda Rajapaksa in November 2005 also significantly changed the dynamic of the conflict. Ironically, reports suggest that Rajapaksa was elected in part because his allies bribed the LTTE to prevent Tamils who were inclined to support the UNP candidate from voting.⁹⁸ Despite using the CFA to consolidate his power and rearm the Tigers, Prabhakaran allegedly urged Tamils to boycott the vote in order to help boost Rajapaksa's chances at the polls. Feeling pressure from both the international community and the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to continue searching for a political settlement, Prabhakaran was keen to find a justification to return to war.⁹⁹ Once in office, Rajapaksa immediately made good on his promise to two Sinhalese political parties to refrain from negotiating a federal solution to the insurgency.¹⁰⁰ President Rajapaksa also signaled an uncompromising approach to dealing with the LTTE when he assigned the Defense Ministry to his brother Gotabaya and appointed Sinhalese nationalist Ratnasiri Wickremanayake as prime minister. With Rajapaksa emphasizing a military response over a political solution, and Prabhakaran demanding full autonomy for a separate Eelam, finding a resolution to the conflict became virtually impossible. Coincidentally, the LTTE actively solicited funds for what they were calling 'the final war' throughout 2005 at the same time that Sri Lanka's newly elected political leadership was consolidating its grip over civil society.¹⁰¹ With both parties adopting positions that were increasingly and obviously unacceptable to the other, the chance for renewed hostilities continued to increase.

⁹⁸ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1037.

⁹⁹ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1036-1040.

¹⁰⁰ *Jane's Intelligence Review*, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: A Case Study" (31 August 2010).

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch, *Funding the Final War*, 26.

Political Will and the SLAF

In August 2006, President Rajapaksa suspended the cease-fire and launched a major new offensive against the LTTE. He did so with a much improved Sri Lankan military that, while struggling in the initial stages of Eelam IV, ultimately overwhelmed the depleted forces of the LTTE. Velupillai Prabhakaran's uncanny ability to unite the opposition against his interests played a large role in his own demise by creating the conditions under which the Sri Lankans would muster the will to center a nation's efforts on improving the hybrid warfare capabilities of the SLAF. Illustrative of this point are the failed suicide attacks against Sri Lanka's battle-hardened General Fonseka and Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa in April 2006 and in December 2006, respectively. Both incidents increased the political will of the GoSL to maintain the strategic effects of unity of effort, media censorship and public support during its campaign to asphyxiate the insurgency. Along with political will, the SLAF's strategy to defeat the LTTE rested on one basic principle: the surest route to victory is the annihilation of the enemy's forces.¹⁰² With the full resources of the Sri Lankan state at its disposal, the SLAF initiated a rapid period of growth and modernization with the military's troop strength reaching 350,000 and defense expenditures totaling \$ 1.74 billion in 2008.¹⁰³ From 2006 - 2009, the SLAF increased its manpower by 50 percent. The military build-up increased dramatically the RMA-I and RMA-IV capabilities of the SLAF that by the end of the conflict were far superior to the Tamil Tigers overused and underresourced hybrid force structure.

Surprisingly, the process of improving the kinetic capabilities and morale of the SLAF started with a post-mortem of all previous operations conducted by the SLAF. This process resulted in the adaptation of new organizational, operational and doctrinal changes that forced the SLAF to adopt more effective tactics and techniques associated with RMAs I and IV but also

¹⁰² John Shy, "Jomini," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*.

¹⁰³ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 13.

trained in the art of RMA-II or guerrilla warfare. By centering the Army's efforts on small unit tactics led by the Special Forces Regiment (SFR), elite commandos infiltrated LTTE-controlled areas with either Long Range Patrols (LRPs) or Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRPs), the SLA was able to challenge the Tamil Tigers in RMA-II warfare while employing sophisticated technologies, platforms and concepts of operation to destroy the movement's military wing. The SLAF also used overwhelming firepower, long range artillery strikes and night operations to reduce the effectiveness of LTTE operations. Prabhakaran's obsession with crafting a military solution to a political problem while significantly outmanned and outgunned is a failure at strategy that transpired into the ways of war that he employed.

With a government determined to defeat the LTTE militarily, and an international community, particularly China, Russia and Pakistan and to a lesser degree the United States and India, willing to provide it sophisticated military hardware and advanced training, the SLAF embarked on a major period of military modernization.¹⁰⁴ With fighter aircraft from China, precision-guided munitions from Pakistan, a command and control center for the SLN from the United States and significant donations including fast-attack craft, radar systems and helicopters from India, the GoSL began preparing for a strategic campaign that combined innovations from RMA- I, II and IV.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, China's support of Sri Lanka allowed President Rajapaksa to pursue his military strategy without significant external interference.¹⁰⁶

Cease-Fires

From the initiation of armed hostilities on 23 July 1983 which marked the beginning of Eelam War I, until the end of Eelam War IV in 2009, Velupillai Prabhakaran remained fixated on an independent Eelam state in the eastern and northern provinces. However, even after

¹⁰⁴ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1045.

¹⁰⁵ Jeremy Page, "Chinese Billions in Sri Lanka Fund Battle Against Tamil Tigers," *Times Online*, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6207487.ece> (2 May 2009).

¹⁰⁶ Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," 1045.

attaining what counterinsurgency expert Dr. Gordon McCormick might call a ‘weak win’ with the Norwegian-mediated Cease Fire Agreement in December 2002, Prabhakaran remained unsatisfied with the endgame - and committed to his original aim of creating an independent Eelam for Sri Lanka’s minority ethnic Tamil population through a military solution.¹⁰⁷

Unsurprisingly, three years later, Prabhakaran rejected what seemed like a relatively promising compromise advanced as a federal solution by then Prime Minister Ranil Wickeremesinghe.

Although numerous Sri Lankan governments attempted to negotiate a political solution with the LTTE, Prabhakaran never appeared ready to give up his quest for an Eelam homeland through military force. Nor did the GoSL appear ready to give in to their demands. With such little faith in the peace negotiations by either side, both groups used the time and space created by each cease-fire including the 2002 CFA to prepare for a renewal of hostilities in what became a familiar series of disingenuous attempts to negotiate a political solution to end the conflict. Time and time again, numerous direct and back-channel negotiations between the GoSL and the LTTE foundered and ultimately the fighting resumed. Prabhakaran’s decision to focus more on waging war at the operational and tactical levels at the expense of the strategic and political levels was a decisive factor in the LTTE’s defeat.

CHAPTER VI: EELAM WAR IV - THE FINAL WAR

Decisive Point: Sea Lines of Communication and Supply

Drawing on the Tamil community’s traditional marine experience, the Sea Tigers established an indigenous manufacturing base to produce a variety of craft and developed tactics that would allow it to provide supply escort and sea transfer functions in international waters.

Breaking its dependence on Tamil Nadu for arms supplies in the mid-1990s, the Tamil Tigers

¹⁰⁷ Gordon H. McCormick, Steven B. Horton and Lauren A. Harrison, “Things Fall Apart: The ‘End Game’ Dynamics of Internal Wars,” *Third World Quarterly* 28, No. 2 (2007): 6-7. ‘Weak’ wins occur when players succeed in pushing an opponent below his breakpoint but are unable or unwilling to extend their control over this contested space. Despite the 2002 Norwegian-mediated Cease Fire Agreement, neither side gained control of any new territory.

were forced to seek other procurement vehicles and thus the LTTE eventually developed a large fleet of deep-sea vessels and floating warehouses as part of its global procurement and resupply network. The significant littoral maritime capabilities of the Sea Tigers were designed primarily to erode the SLNs operational capability and thereby deter it from operating in areas where it could interfere with LTTE combat or supply operations. This was a typical RMA-I and RMA-II counter to a superior SLN joint RMA-I and RMA-IV capability.

The trajectory of the conflict changed once the SLN had successfully interdicted and neutralized the Tamil Tigers sea lines of communication and supply in 2006-2007. In the Jomini sense, the SLAF identified the LTTE's decisive points and struck a near fatal body blow. "If there was one single military action that tilted the balance in favor of the GoSL," adds defense expert Ashok Mehta, "it was identifying and destroying the LTTE's supply chain together with its floating warehouses."¹⁰⁸ For years, the Tigers owned the seas, conducting sophisticated covert supply escort and arms transfer operations, while ferrying food, oil and other equipment into ports under their control. By 2006, however, the Sri Lankans were receiving intelligence assistance from the United States and India in the form of satellite imagery to locate and successfully target the floating arms warehouses.¹⁰⁹ What makes this factor so striking is that even after the destruction of its sea lines of communication and supply, the LTTE continued to defend key terrain as a hybrid force during Eelam War IV, refusing to revert back to Mao's second phase of guerrilla warfare, or a predominately RMA-II approach.

Political Environs

While low-level violence broke out in December 2005, Eelam War IV officially started at the Mavil Aru reservoir in July 2006 and ended on a tiny sliver of beachhead near the LTTE stronghold of Mullaitivu on May 18, 2009. After nearly three years of intense fighting in which

¹⁰⁸ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 6.

¹⁰⁹ Shanaka Jayasekara, "How the LTTE was Destroyed," *Asian Conflicts Reports*, No. 6 (June 2009).

the LTTE attempted to counter the SLAFs overwhelming use of RMAs I and IV, the Tamil Tigers finally capitulated. The total destruction of the LTTE by the SLAF is related to many distinct factors, but Prabhakaran's failure to recognize the massive changes taking place in the conflict environment – but within the SLAF specifically - including the scope of Sri Lanka's weapons procurement effort are major oversights that should have been factored into Prabhakaran's strategy. After the 2005 election, the brothers Rajapaksa continued the efforts of their predecessors to build capacity within and improve the capabilities of the SLAF. Moreover, neither Rajapaksa was influenced by any combat or propaganda capability in the LTTE's arsenal. In addition to its increased internal capacity, the GoSL also benefited from a much more favorable political environment that had slowly turned its back on the LTTE starting in the mid-1990s.¹¹⁰

The Final War: Three Phases

Eelam War IV was launched in three stages as a reaction to the LTTE's attempt to draw government forces into a fight by closing the sluice gates of the Mavil Aru reservoir in July 2006. Though the gates are located in the east, this act of provocation (RMA-II) cut the water supply to thousands of villagers in predominately Sinhalese government-controlled areas.¹¹¹ With an exhaustive knowledge of both the human and physical terrain, Colonel Karuna, the former Tiger leader who split from Prabhakaran and joined the GoSL in 2004, played a leading role in the government's pacification efforts in the east. After a fierce measure-countermeasure dynamic that incorporated elements of RMAs I, II and IV, the SLAF captured Thoppigala in July

¹¹⁰ Following India, the United States and Great Britain, Canada proscribed the LTTE on 8 April 2006 and the 27 member European Union proscribed the LTTE on 29 May 2006. This pattern illustrates the growing trend of the international community to outlaw or condemn terrorist activity including suicide bombings and child soldiers after 9/11. Ravinatha P. Aryasinha, "Time to Act: The LTTE, its Front Organizations, and the Challenge to Europe," EU-US International Seminar on LTTE, EUROPOL (December 2008).

¹¹¹ M. R. Narayan Swamy, *The Tiger Vanquished: LTTE's Story* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010), xx.

2007, the LTTE's biggest operational base in the east.¹¹² The eastern campaign incorporated capabilities spanning several different ways of war including joint air-land-sea operations, Special Forces units infiltrating behind LTTE-controlled lines and conventional maritime guerrilla warfare.¹¹³

The second phase of Eelam War IV consisted of an 18-month northern offensive that centered on Jaffna, seizing the strategically vital isthmus, known as Elephant Pass, and ended in the Tigers' collapse that began in January 2009 when they lost their de-facto capital of Kilinochchi. "Engaging the LTTE on a broad front in the rear and on the flanks turned the table doctrinally on the LTTE," states defense analyst Ashok Mehta, "the conventional SLA was fighting using guerilla tactics while the Tigers were being forced to fight conventional set-piece battles."¹¹⁴ The second stage of Eelam IV consisted of the SLAF using a combination of RMAs-I, II and IV (leaning more towards the guerrilla side of the continuum) to counter the LTTEs two-pronged combination of RMAs-I and II. Prabhakaran's decision to hold key terrain in fixed conventional defensive engagements against a superior opponent with access to a full spectrum of RMA-I, II and IV capabilities illustrates the folly in the LTTE's strategy. As counterinsurgency theorist David Galula notes, "The insurgent units' lack of punch-their feeble logistical capacities-rule out fixed defensive operations."¹¹⁵ Again, excellent tactics could not compensate for a faulty strategy.

Prabhakaran's failure to plan for the protection and support that conventional forces need once movement warfare begins against a superior opponent illustrates a failed strategy or at least the failure to recognize the need for a different one. Their remaining fighters, a force of about fifteen thousand, retreated into the jungle near the coastal town of Mullaittivu, taking along more

¹¹² *Jane's Intelligence Review*, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: A Case Study" (31 August 2010).

¹¹³ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 6.

¹¹⁴ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 8.

¹¹⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security, 1964), 37.

than three-hundred thousand Tamil civilians who were trapped with them.¹¹⁶ In the final assault, the SLAF descended on Mullaithivu, boxing in 3,000 hardcore fighters, backed by the civilians, who were allegedly being used as human shields into an area of about 1,000 sq. km.¹¹⁷ As the SLAF closed in, Prabhakaran grew more desperate, hoping that the Sri Lankan diaspora would pressure the international community to intervene on the Tigers' behalf. Despite facing significant international pressure to rapidly terminate operations, the SLAF used vigorous diplomacy and strategic dodging to wait out a series of important political events in neighboring India. The foreign secretaries of France and Great Britain even flew to Sri Lanka, where they pleaded with the government to call a ceasefire in order to rescue the civilians who were still trapped.¹¹⁸ Suspicious that the diplomats also wanted to rescue LTTE's C2 element including Velupillai Prabhakaran and his senior cadre, Mahinda Rajapaksa's government ignored them. The final battle was methodically planned by the SLA after the completion of the national elections in Tamil Nadu and the results of the Indian general election made public.¹¹⁹ Two days later, Prabhakaran was dead and the flames of the insurgency were extinguished.

While the revolution in military affairs is a sound framework within which to analyze the measure-countermeasure dynamic of warfare in Sri Lanka, a deeper analysis warrants the unpacking of the individual, organizational and systemic level factors that most impacted the strategies of both parties during Eelam War IV. As such, the conflict cannot be analyzed in an RMA vacuum. Ironically, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora provided the insurgents with the capabilities to engage in conventional warfare but it was Prabhakaran who determined the ways in which the war would ultimately be fought. Behind the various ways of war employed by both parties during the final phase of the conflict were decisions made by Velupillai Prabhakaran and

¹¹⁶ John Lee Anderson, "Death of a Tiger," *The New Yorker* 86, No. 44 (17 January 2011).

¹¹⁷ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 3.

¹¹⁸ John Lee Anderson. "Death of a Tiger."

¹¹⁹ Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," 10.

his counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksa. These decisions were based, some more than others, on changes in the conflict environment.

While scholars and analysts may disagree over the key factors that led to the demise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, any analysis that discounts the human factor in the destruction of the LTTE is intellectually dishonest. In the end, Velupillai Prabhakaran's fixation on an independent Tamil Eelam homeland was less a strength and more a weakness for the Tamil Tigers. Prior to and during Eelam War IV, several factors should have impacted Prabhakaran's strategy: shifting public sentiment on terrorist activities such as suicide bombings and targeting killings; the defection of the LTTE's most senior eastern commander, Colonel Karuna; the election of hardliner Mahinda Rajapaksa on a platform of no compromise with the LTTE; the increased capacity and improved capabilities of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces; and the destruction of the LTTE's decisive point, its sea lines of communication and supply. Though the concept of revolution in military affairs sets a starting point to analyze the strategies of both actors, we must explore the human component of this conflict in order to unearth a rich analysis of the factors that led to the demise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The twenty-six year secessionist insurgency in Sri Lanka presents a unique case study on irregular and hybrid warfare. What is striking about the conflict in Sri Lanka is not just the ability of a non-state actor to employ a lethal mix of technology and tactics to level the playing field military with a state, a trend that is likely to continue in the future, but that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam did so largely on its own. Unlike other powerful armed non-state organizations such as Hezbollah or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), groups that operate with powerful state backers, the LTTE was a self-help organization that used tactical ingenuity and technical innovation to advance its cause. Throughout the conflict, the LTTE evolved into a complex

organism: one part hybrid warrior, one part criminal mastermind, one part propagandist and one part entrepreneur.

At home, the LTTE developed an indigenous industrial manufacturing base to support its progression along Mao's guerrilla-conventional continuum. This sophisticated capability allowed the Tamil Tigers to sustain the insurgency by producing or assembling hard materials (e.g. attack craft, suicide bombing vests and improvised explosive devices and mines) and then by rapidly absorbing the hardware into its operational concepts (i.e. suicide bombing, targeted assassinations and swarming tactics). Abroad, the LTTE employed sophisticated subversive capabilities in order to organize and penetrate its growing Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Armed with a cause, the LTTE ran sophisticated propaganda, fundraising and weapons procurement operations that helped sustain its twenty-six year secessionist struggle.

The implications of the conflict do not end, however, with the Tamil Tigers, but rather the government of Sri Lanka, who eventually pushed back with enough pressure to kill off an entire movement and its leadership cadre in one fell swoop. In Sri Lanka, Velupillai Prabhakaran's preoccupation with military victory resulted in neglect for a highly fluid conflict environment - a mistake for which no amount of tactical genius could correct. The implications herein are thus numerous for both the counterinsurgents and the insurgents, and for western military and civilian leaders.

Technology

The ways in which the LTTE developed capabilities to undercut traditional strengths and concepts of operation of a weak state are increasingly familiar aspects of the global security environment. What is troubling for western military planners is the growing lethality of adversary capabilities as a result of technical innovation, access and diffusion. With access to increasingly sophisticated, lethal, accessible (off-the-shelf), cost-effective and user-friendly

technologies, small groups and individuals are leveling the playing field militarily with states. While this phenomenon is not new, lower barriers to entry for non-state actors made possible by military-technology enablers in place as part of the globalized economy will continue to present challenges for western militaries. Future conflicts will not only include groups employing conventional and irregular approaches in the same battlespace, they will also include a convergence of non-state actors with different ends attempting to disrupt civil society and destabilize national governments worldwide. The rapid absorption and application of technologies into enemy concept of operations will present significant challenges for western military capability development in the future.

The Role of Diasporas in International Relations

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora played a key role in sustaining the insurgency. Through subversive activities that exploited rapid advances in information and communications technologies, the LTTE organized and penetrated the resource rich and increasingly powerful Tamil communities in England, Canada, the United States, India, Australia and South Africa, among others. With diaspora communities comprising some of the world's fastest growing populations, the convergence of diasporas and information technology, or RMA-IV, is likely to have significant implications for international relations, especially for host-nations with large unassimilated diaspora communities with a stake in distant conflicts. Today diasporas are able to use the Internet to mobilize resources and people to advance a cause in a host-nation while attempting to delegitimize the opposition in another.

Moreover, information technology is creating a constant virtual link between diasporas and their countries of origin that non-state actors can exploit to create instability. With constant and instant connectivity, individuals or groups can develop and maintain virtual worlds and online communities that cater to different interests, nationalities and ethnicities. This space can

be easily used as recruitment and propaganda centers for various causes and as such pose significant questions for law enforcement and intelligence officials. This relationship is reducing - or eliminating - the need for diasporas to assimilate with the local norms and practices of a host-nation, which further exacerbates local tensions between competing ethnic groups. Second, technology is causing physical borders to be replaced with virtual ones. For example, non-state actors are now able to administer control remotely over citizens in a different country. This includes the adjudication of disputes or the redress of grievances of a large social group. With increased access to the Internet and the proliferation of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, diaspora have the ability to stay connected with their native homeland through the Internet. As a result, future wars and international relations are likely to be initiated or impacted by the combination of mass media and diaspora communities.

Countering Armed Rebellion

A decisive military defeat of any armed organization, state or non-state, is rare. Likewise, a decisive military defeat of an internal insurgency by a national government absent a political settlement is all the more remarkable. As a result, general theories of war positing the declining utility of kinetic military strategies, such as those employed by the SLAF during Eelam War IV, deserve more scrutiny. In *The Utility of Force*, military theorist Rupert Smith posits that the time for strictly conventional force-on-force war has expired. According to Smith, “War as cognitively known by most non-combatants... war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such a war no longer exists.”¹²⁰ Although it’s far too early to tell if the conflict in Sri Lanka will reconstitute itself in another form - terrorist, insurgent or otherwise - the SLAFs convincing military victory over the Tamil Tigers should give pause to those analysts and scholars who quickly dismiss the utility of Jominiesque brute force as a means to an end to

¹²⁰ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2005), 3.

insurgency in the 21st century. The lesson from Sri Lanka's experience against the LTTE is that overwhelming force can defeat armed rebellion in relatively short order.

Leadership Decapitation

The Sri Lankan Armed Forces defeated the Tamil insurgency and decapitated its hierarchical leadership structure including its founding father Velupillai Prabhakaran in May 2009. Since then, there has not been a single attack directed against the Government of Sri Lanka by the LTTE. Such an ending supports, at least empirically, the concept that armed rebels can still be forced militarily to give up fighting for control over political space and that leadership decapitation is effective against hierarchical organizations. Counterinsurgents or other forces will not be so lucky in the future, however, since enemy threat groups will likely operate in more decentralized and networked form in order to reduce their signature. In the future, speed, surprise, anonymity and sequence will create a huge tactical advantage for the adversary. Groups will possess the ability to disperse, move quickly and fix a target, concentrating only long enough to provide a target of opportunity for a minimum amount of time. In sum, future armed non-state actors will not likely present themselves as targets of opportunities in the way that Velupillai Prabhakaran did with his Tigers.

The Downside of Intervention

Intervening in foreign wars often leads to the prolonging of violent conflict. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1999, Edward N. Luttwak argued that “despite wars’ great evil, it often leads to a political solution and lasting peace - unlike negotiated third-party ceasefires.”¹²¹ The case study in Sri Lanka exemplifies this point as both parties used international negotiated ceasefires as a ruse to recoup and continue fighting. “A cease-fire tends to arrest war-induced exhaustion and lets belligerents reconstitute and rearm their forces,” adds Luttwak, “it intensifies and

¹²¹ Edward N. Luttwak, “Give War a Chance,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 4 (July-August 1999):

prolongs the struggle once the cease-fire ends - and it does usually end.”¹²² Determining whether more innocent blood would have been spilled in Sri Lanka had the government lacked the political will to muster the necessary resources and conviction to destroy the insurgency is largely an academic exercise at this point. Yet the potential implications of another decade of conflict in Sri Lanka on both the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese cannot be ignored. Though politically unfeasible, decisive victory is sometimes preferable to prolonging a conflict unnecessarily through meaningless - and temporary - ceasefires. Due to the cost in both blood and treasure of intervening in small wars, policies of non-intervention may deserve considerably more attention than they have in the last three decades.

Counterinsurgency

The hyper-kinetic line of attack that the Sri Lankan Armed Forces used to defeat the LTTE worked well for the SLAF. Along similar lines, a fierce debate continues inside western military circles over the merits of various approaches to counterinsurgency. However, this line of reasoning presents a false binary choice both between population- and enemy-centric approaches to COIN and between irregular and conventional warfare. “As several studies show,” says Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II, Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College, “many of the skills required to fight so-called traditional wars are the same as those required to defeat insurgencies. The key competency is understanding when and how to shift priorities - a skill that doctrine can facilitate, but, not surprisingly, requires considerable experience.”¹²³ Since the precise method that any government takes to defeat an insurgency depends on the conflict environment, and the composition of both the insurgents and the counterinsurgents, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that governments can take to defeat insurgencies. That the method applied to the conflict in Sri Lanka worked well for the GoSL but may have no bearing on other

¹²² Edward N. Luttwak, “Give War a Chance.”

¹²³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Reconsidering War’s Logic and Grammar,” *Infinity Journal 2* (Spring 2011).

conflicts is a hard lesson to draw. However, attempts to draw broad trends across conflict environments should be ignored or received with large doses of skepticism.

A primary consideration of this conflict is therefore not to frame the insurgency in an enemy-center vs. population centric narrative, but to acknowledge that the best and fastest way to defeat an insurgency is to allow the insurgency to move to Mao's third phase of guerrilla warfare. After an insurgency moves to phase three operations, the counterinsurgency force can application overwhelming military force to create an asymmetry that favors the counterinsurgent. Unfortunately, due to advances in ISR and communications technologies, future non-state adversaries are more likely to mass in time, coordinating spectacular attacks with small groups of like-minded individuals, and less likely to mass in physical space, seizing and holding key terrain. This enemy distribution will create significant challenges for western military capability innovation.

CONCLUSION

The way in which the Government of Sri Lanka executed its strategy in Eelam War IV has drawn the ire of a substantial part of the international community. Reports claim that the conflict took the lives of up to one-hundred thousand Sri Lankans including tens of thousands of unarmed civilians.¹²⁴ Others suggest that Eelam War IV, particularly the last five months of combat, included repeated violations of international humanitarian law by both the Sri Lankans and the Tamil Tigers.¹²⁵ Though the extent to which war crimes or other atrocities were committed by either party remains in dispute, it is increasingly likely that hybrid wars of the future will involve a blurring of the line between combatants and non-combatants.

¹²⁴ John Lee Anderson, "Death of a Tiger."

¹²⁵ For allegations of war crimes against both the Tamil Tigers and the Government of Sri Lanka, see International Crisis Group, "War Crimes In Sri Lanka," Asia Report 191 (17 May 2010) and U.S. Department of State, "Report To Congress on Measures Taken by the Government of Sri Lanka and International Bodies To Investigate Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka, and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Such Efforts," *Office of War Crimes* (11 August 2010).

Although violent hybrid warfare is not a new phenomenon, the mastery of the interaction of numerous ways of war by a non-state actor is. Constantly adapting and innovating in the military realm, the LTTE pioneered the use of RMAs-I, II and IV, especially the strategy of the insurgent, including suicide bombings and assassinations and the use of subversion through its diaspora for fundraising, weapons procurement and propaganda purposes. This interaction of different ways of war often shocked the international community, inspired copy-cat tactics among other violent non-state actors and left the stagnant GoSL stunned and embarrassed.

The highly-fluid and complex nature of warfare in Sri Lanka spanned the four revolutions in military affairs that occurred during the 20th century. For this reason, an exhaustive study of the twenty-six year insurgency through the RMAs as ways of war that mingled with each other in a process of adaptability, fluctuating with the ebb and flow of the campaign, is key to gaining a greater understanding of the factors that impacted the defeat of the LTTE. “These alternative ways of war,” says Wilson, “interact with each other as a form of measure and countermeasure in both the operational sense and in the grand-strategic sense of warfare. In other words, a new way of war will not extinguish a previous way of war or RMA; rather, it will act as a countermeasure to that particular way of war.”¹²⁶

What started out in Sri Lanka as an RMA-II response by the LTTE to address the grievances of a minority population by countering an RMA-I capability transpired over three decades into an aggressive strategic competition in which both opponents constantly adapted new tactics, techniques and procedures to best the other’s operational and strategic approach. Throughout the campaign, the Tamil Tigers employed portions of RMA-I, RMA-II and to a lesser degree traces of RMA-IV to counter an evolving Sri Lankan military which itself only began to develop significant RMA-I and RMA-IV capabilities in response to the superior

¹²⁶ Peter Wilson, “Revolutions in Military Affairs:” 9.

capabilities of its non-state opponent. This back and forth, or ‘measure-countermeasure dynamic,’ lasted until the SLAF eventually isolated the LTTE politically and then routed it militarily with overwhelming firepower and sophisticated joint operations.

When Mahinda Rajapaksa became President in November 2005, the LTTE controlled large swathes of territory in the northern districts of Mullaithivu, Killinochchi, and parts of Mannar. Like many insurgent groups that grow in military strength, the Tamil Tigers’ increased capacity and operational effectiveness actually galvanized the political will in Sri Lanka to support substantial increases in resources including defense spending. Ironically, the tactical and operational successes of Prabhakaran helped resource the SLAF response to three-decades of violence.¹²⁷ This newfound political will allowed the brothers Rajapaksa to transition to new, more costly ways of war that included new technologies and concepts of operations from RMAs I, II and III.

By contrast, the seduction of a Tamil Eelam homeland, along with its accompanying conventional force structure, proved too distracting for Prabhakaran in the end. Rather than reverting to an RMA-II, Maoist posture, Prabhakaran’s Tigers attempted to hold terrain against a superior SLAF. Accordingly, although attrition, not territory was President Rajapaksa’s original goal, it appears that not reaching an agreement was far too attractive an outcome for the Sri Lankans even before the cracks in the LTTEs armor began appearing but especially after the aim of destroying the LTTE became possible. Although human behavior and its role in conflict is least studied by scholars, the rise and fall of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam cannot be analyzed in an intellectually honest manner without the idiosyncrasies and misperception associated with human behavior.

¹²⁷ Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010): xvii.

It isn't so much that the LTTE made a major strategic error in transitioning to Mao's Phase III operations too soon, attempting to fight this conflict more as a civil war than as an insurgency, but rather that Prabhakaran did not revert to the war of the flea when fluid circumstances suggested otherwise. In the end, the superior tactics and techniques of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam could not compensate for a flawed strategy and the Tamil Tigers ended up on the losing side of a "weak state vs. strong state" scenario. The LTTE's military defeat, however, is a direct consequence of Velupillai Prabhakaran's obsession with achieving the group's original aim - creating an independent Eelam homeland - through a military solution.

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