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Can the Sri Lanka Army be Described as a Counterinsurgency Force?

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‘Today we have been able to liberate the country from the clutches of the LTTE. ... We have set a fine example for the entire world.’^[i] With these words, broadcast to the nation on 19 May 2009, President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced the death of Vellupillai Prabhakaran and the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), bringing an end to Sri Lanka’s civil war. The cost exacted by the conflict remains contested. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) estimates that 9,000 people lost their lives during the final phase of the civil war,^[ii] while a United Nations report places this figure at 40,000.^[iii] Allegations of atrocities and human rights violations have been well documented.^[iv] A UN report published in April 2011 unequivocally states that the GoSL and armed forces were responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity – an explicit rebuttal to the GoSL’s framing of Eelam War IV as a ‘humanitarian operation’ with minimal civilian casualties – a counterinsurgency campaign within the broader context of the global ‘war on terror’.^[v]

The tenets that form much of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine have to a great extent been shaped by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We should be cognisant of this provenance: much of what we consider essential to counterinsurgency is based on the military experiences of the West. According to the definition adopted by the US Military in *FM 3-24*, an insurgency is ‘an organised, protracted politico-military struggle ... aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government’.^[vi] Counterinsurgency, as its opposite, is ‘an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that governments take to defeat insurgencies’.^[vii] Chief among the tenets that have come to characterise contemporary Western counterinsurgency doctrine is the importance of popular support – the oft-cited ability to win ‘hearts and minds’ in a ‘population-centric’ political and military campaign. In the words of military strategist David Kilcullen, ‘all successful counterinsurgents have been willing and able to kill the enemy’ but ‘have clearly distinguished that enemy from the population in which it hides’, applying violence ‘precisely and carefully’ and ‘emphasis[ing] measures to protect and win over the population’.^[viii] Kilcullen further stresses that, contrary to the opinion of some ‘armchair chicken hawks’, the “‘kill them all” approach to counterinsurgency [is] demonstrably counterproductive’.^[ix]

As potentially the ‘first counterinsurgency victory of the twenty-first century’, the Sri Lankan experience turns much of this conventional wisdom on its head.^[x] The ‘Sri Lankan model’, as it has become known, demonstrated a new way of conducting counterinsurgency operations – one in which political solutions were supplanted by absolute military victory. Although a firm advocate of the population-centric model, Kilcullen states that ‘our knowledge of counterinsurgency is never static, always evolving’ and it is in this

vein that a serious assessment of the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) as a counterinsurgency force is warranted. Significant scholarly attention has been paid to how *Western* military powers wage counterinsurgency campaigns, but, as Hashim notes, '[the way in which] *non*-Western states learn irregular war is an under-researched area of study'.^[xi] The implications of including the Sri Lankan model within the remit of counterinsurgency are significant. It would disprove the notion that counterinsurgency campaigns are necessarily drawn out over many years and undermine the importance of political solutions, instead showing that brute force *can* achieve decisive victory. This carries real-world consequences: it was not without reason that Israel, Thailand, Pakistan and Myanmar approached the SLA for advice and training in dealing with their own domestic insurgencies.^[xii]

This paper contends that although the SLA exhibited significant tactical innovation, which undoubtedly proved pivotal in securing the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, they cannot be described as a counterinsurgency force. Rather, the Sri Lankan civil war—Eelam War IV (2006-2009) in particular—is best thought of as a conventional war prosecuted by hybrid means. This argument will be advanced with four questions in mind: were the SLA fighting an insurgency or are the LTTE better thought of as part of a separatist quasi-state that increasingly exhibited the hallmarks of a conventional military force; does the military innovation exhibited by the SLA qualify them as a 'counterinsurgency force' or is this better understood as an example of what Frank Hoffman has termed 'hybrid war';^[xiii] is it possible to isolate the SLA as a 'counterinsurgency force' or does this disguise a wider political culture of Sinhala nationalism and entrenched militarisation; and, as the political situation in Sri Lanka remains fragile, can we describe as 'counterinsurgent' an army and campaign that relied solely on military power at the expense of the political – and is it too early to make this call?

Insurgency or Quasi-state?

The LTTE was not a 'typical' insurgent group and, from the late 1990s onwards, is better thought of as constitutive of a separatist quasi-state. The efforts of the Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe governments to depoliticise Tamil nationalism through limited devolution (which failed to address desired self-determination and recognition of the Tamil homeland) drove a strategy in which Tamil state structures were developed to either condition the terms of a future power-sharing arrangement or to provide the architecture on which an independent sovereign Tamil state would be built.^[xiv] The LTTE effectively ran a *de facto* state administration which encompassed taxation, policing, a judicial system, public services and development projects.^[xv]

The nature of the LTTE as a military force was also atypical for an insurgency. Prabhakaran inculcated a gradual 'regularisation' with decreasing use of the guerrilla tactics that had previously made them so successful in favour of those of a conventional state military. Indeed, this shift was so prominent it prompted General Fonseka, Commander of the Army at the time, to say 'they [LTTE] thought they had developed a conventional army capability ... we were like two armies fighting'.^[xvi] Military operations became more explicitly concerned with the maintenance of territorial control, and, as Mehta argues, 'Prabhakaran repeatedly made the error of fighting a conventional battle instead of employing superior guerrilla tactics ... the LTTE wage[d] fixed defensive battles without any recourse to offensive action.'^[xvii]

These factors brought about a qualitative change in the nature of the LTTE, making it more akin—in both administrative structure and military prowess—to a conventional state. The development of quasi-state institutions was a logical step toward achieving a sovereign Tamil state, but the 'regularisation' of its military forces arguably precipitated its downfall as it allowed the SLA to innovate in turn, adopting a more ruthless and aggressive style of fighting against a less mobile, more predictable enemy. While the *de facto* state administration run by the LTTE was not recognised as such, this did not change the ground-

level reality where the SLA were fighting not against a typical ‘fluid’ insurgency but against a developed conventional military force.

Adaptation

Between 1983-2002 the SLA faced considerable difficulty in effectively countering the advances of the LTTE,^[xviii] suffering significant casualties in the early- and mid-1990s. It was estimated that by the end of that decade nearly two-thirds of the LTTE’s heavy equipment and small arms had been seized from the SLA.^[xix] Such failures prompted one former SLA chief to privately describe the Sri Lanka Army as a ‘funk army’.^[xx] What changed to permit the total defeat of the LTTE in 2009?

Fonseka undertook a significant expansion of Sri Lanka’s military: 80,000 additional recruits were brought into the Army, with nearly 40,000 troops added in 2008 alone.^[xxi] These increases in physical strength were matched by tactical innovation in what Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa termed a ‘new radical approach’.^[xxii] Recognising the weaknesses they had exhibited in the past, the SLA made a ‘cultural shift from conventional military thinking to one that adopted unconventional and guerrilla methods’,^[xxiii] ‘tailoring and training a conventional army to fight unconventionally’.^[xxiv]

In general terms, the SLA abandoned a conventional ‘hold and build’ strategy, considering territorial control as of secondary importance to maintaining the momentum of the war by continually launching new offensives with the intention of eliminating combatants.^[xxv] Infantry training was remodelled to emphasise section-level small units over the traditional platoon.^[xxvi] Highly-trained ‘Special Infantry Operations Teams’ (SIOTs)—eight-man teams which specialise in jungle guerrilla warfare, explosives and communications—were used to penetrate deep into LTTE territory and engage in hit-and-run attacks. These units exposed a new vulnerability exhibited by the ‘regularised’ LTTE, taking a physical and psychological toll:^[xxvii] ‘our soldiers were hitting them from all directions ... they [LTTE] found it very uncomfortable in the jungles’.^[xxviii] The Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) worked closely with SIOT units to gather intelligence and coordinate airstrikes, taking out a number of LTTE leaders with precision guided munitions. The Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) also played a key role in isolating the LTTE by cutting off seaborne connectivity between the North and East, and between the LTTE and the outside world. A naval cordon was established which proved near-impossible for the LTTE’s maritime and logistics units to penetrate, and supply lines—embedded in strong and entrenched international networks—were explicitly targeted. From 2006-2008, 32 confrontations took place at sea in which 11 LTTE warehouse ships containing over 10,000 tonnes of arms, weaponry and munitions were captured or destroyed.^[xxix]

The defection of the Karuna Group in 2004 marked a significant victory for the SLA and mirrored the ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy common to many counterinsurgency campaigns, including Afghanistan. The importance of the defection was twofold: it marked the loss of 3,000 trained cadres, but also—and perhaps more significantly—undermined the LTTE leadership’s trust in the loyalty of eastern ethnic Tamils, diminishing the pool of potential recruits.

Recognising the importance of the diaspora, thought to raise around \$200m per year, GoSL effectively manipulated the post-9/11 security environment to tighten transnational funding networks.^[xxx] Foreign governments were lobbied until 32 countries designated the LTTE a terrorist organisation, the legal implications of which greatly restricted the ability to send remittances to fund the war effort. Information flows into and out of the conflict zones were also tightly controlled. Enacting what has been described as a ‘media gag’, the government created the Media Centre for National Security to which all press enquiries were directed—a tactic described by Mehta as a ‘single window concept’—which effectively countered LTTE propaganda and ensured they ‘lost the media war they had always won in the past’.^[xxxi]

Are these tactical shifts—both on and off the battlefield—traits of an effective counterinsurgency force?

Kilcullen states that counterinsurgency is a battle in which ‘all sides engage in an extremely rapid, complex, and continuous process of competitive adaptation’.^[xxxii] In so far as the SLA learnt the lessons of past experience and innovated, adapting a conventional military to fight by unconventional means, then it may be considered as such. Yet we should be wary of so readily applying this label. Counterinsurgency and conventional warfare are not mutually exclusive categories and the ‘adaptation’ which aided the SLA in achieving victory in 2009 is better considered a case—perhaps the paradigmatic example to date—of what Frank Hoffman has termed ‘hybrid war’.^[xxxiii] ‘War is likely to transcend neat divisions into distinct categories’ and be ‘multi-modal’ writes Hoffman, arguing that rather than falling into one operational category, conflicts of the future will be ‘best characterised by convergence’.^[xxxiv] The SLA did not abandon conventional military operations for guerrilla tactics wholesale, but rather used each to its advantage to create synergistic effects.

Sinhala-Buddhism-Nation-State-Military

Is it possible to isolate the SLA as a ‘counterinsurgency force’ or does this disguise a broader Sinhala nationalist discourse, binary imagination and entrenched militarisation that posits territorial Sri Lanka as an inviolable Sinhala-Buddhist homeland and seeks to institute what David Rampton has termed a ‘biopolitical ordering’ within a ‘framework that places Sinhala at the apex’?^[xxxv] While beyond the remit of this paper to explore in full, some brief observations are warranted.

The defeat of the LTTE drew comparisons with the *Mahavamsa*, specifically likening Rajapaksa and Dutugemunu, whose victory over Chola King Elara at Anuradhapura is an oft-cited episode in Sri Lanka’s foundational mythology. ‘It took 13 years for Dutugemunu to ... establish total sovereignty over Sri Lanka ... it took less than three years for President Rajapaksa to achieve the same goal.’^[xxxvi] Neloufer de Mel notes in her landmark study, *Militarising Sri Lanka*, that ‘the use of historical memories, whether of past wounds, victories, heroes or legends ... are key elements in militarisation.’^[xxxvii] She further argues that ‘militarisation is not simply the process whereby the military seeks political domination ... when civilian leaderships put military power to civil use to “save the nation” or to solve political problems, the process itself militarises society.’^[xxxviii] Two examples illustrate the extent to which the idea of ethnic duality and militarism are embedded in everyday practice. On the one hand, the Sinhalisation of the military—only 5 per cent Tamil at the outbreak of the conflict in 1983—shows its prevalence on a national level while, on the other, the erosion of Sinhala-Tamil intermarriage in multi-ethnic border areas indicates the extent to which it infiltrates the personal.^[xxxix]

How does this relate to our assessment of the SLA as a counterinsurgency force? The discourse of Sinhala nationalism posits the boundaries of the Sinhalese, Buddhism and territorial Sri Lanka as contiguous. Through this lens, threats to Sri Lanka’s unity are considered *existential*. Second, a paradox exists in the relationship between Sinhala-Buddhist authoritarianism (the ‘national security state’) and the LTTE. Rajapaksa’s power is built on and tested by his ability to counter militant Tamil separatism, yet can only be maintained by ensuring the government’s ‘stranglehold over political power’ and ‘a real or imagined fear of an LTTE revival’.^[xl] To assess the SLA in isolation of the wider political context that surrounds the ‘Tamil question’ neglects this wider political culture. In the words of Michael Woost, the conflict ‘has not just happened to Sri Lanka but in many ways has become Sri Lanka.’^[xli]

Absence of a Political Solution

‘A victory is not the destruction in a given area of the insurgent’s force and his political organisation ... a victory is that plus the permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population, *isolation not enforced upon the population, but maintained by and with the population*’.^[xlii]

The absence of an accompanying political solution is perhaps the defining feature of the ‘Sri Lankan

model' and alleged violations of human rights and war crimes have formed the basis on which many have dismissed its relevance to wider discursive debates. As Hashim notes, 'the West has tended to point fingers at the COIN campaigns of non-Western countries and to criticise them if they do not adhere to Western ethical and moral standards.'^[xliii] Acknowledging that there exists no universally applicable model for counterinsurgency, does the predilection of the SLA for the use of military force—epitomised in Fonseka's motto 'go for the kill, maximum casualties and destruction of the infrastructure of the enemy'—preclude it from being described as a counterinsurgency force?^[xliv]

The GoSL and SLA may have won the war but—as a result of deliberate policies—they are failing to win the peace. The defeat of the LTTE did not signal the death of Tamil irredentism, and refusal to address the fundamental grievances concerning accountability and political devolution is generating nostalgia for the former quasi-state administration run by the LTTE.^[xlv] The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) has been widely condemned as a whitewash, hampered by its limited mandate and lack of independence, and GoSL have failed to implement its recommendations. Formerly LTTE-controlled areas have been subject to continued militarisation and 'High Security Zones' (HSZs) have become seemingly permanent. Distrust and resentment of the ethnicised police and army remains strong and agitation and political dissent are ruthlessly repressed, illustrated in Gotabaya Rajapaksa's declaration that anyone who challenges the military will be dealt with as a 'terrorist'.^[xlvi] With no intention of security sector reform, Sri Lankan Tamils have little reason to believe this situation will change.

The Provincial Council elections held in Northern Province in September 2013 were the first in twenty-five years and saw a landslide victory for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) candidate C.V. Vigneswaran, taking 30 of the 38 seats with 78.48 per cent of the vote.^[xlvii] Many perceived this result as a reaffirmation of support for Tamil separatism, yet the TNA stood on a federal platform, seeking the 'sharing of powers ... through a shared sovereignty'.^[xlviii] Vigneswaran further confirmed the TNA's commitment to a unitary Sri Lanka in an interview with *The Sunday Leader* in which he stated that the Tamil population were 'looking forward to working out their political future with the cooperation and consensus of the central government' and that 'federalism is not separation'.^[xlix] The TNA's victory did, however, put on record the anger of the Tamil population at GoSL's failure to establish meaningful reconciliation, accountability and political devolution.

The problems brought by the emergence of a Sinhala 'national security state' are not restricted to formerly LTTE-controlled areas. The Eighteenth Amendment, passed in September 2010, removed the constitutional limit on the re-election of the President and expanded the power of the executive to make appointments to independent positions concerned with elections, human rights and the judiciary.^[l] Former chief justice Shirani Bandaranayake was impeached in November 2012 on charges widely believed to have been fabricated in order to further curb the independence of the judiciary and concentrate power with the executive.

The end of the *war* did not signal the end of the *conflict* and without addressing the political grievances that lay behind it, the prospect of renewed Tamil irredentism will remain. While public triumphalism surrounds GoSL's defeat of the LTTE in 2009, private interviews with political leaders suggest 'palpable fear of the revival of Tamil extremism' remains, and this is one of the reasons that GoSL continues to view domestic political matters almost exclusively through the lens of national security.^[li] This shows that even in the upper echelons of government, belief in possible recrudescence of the civil war remains real, problematising the SLA's success in countering the LTTE.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that the SLA cannot be described as a counterinsurgency force for four reasons. The

LTTE was not a typical insurgency and is better considered as a *de facto* quasi-state with institutions covering taxation, policing, judiciary and public services. Accompanying this was a shift in the military strategy of the LTTE, away from the guerrilla-style tactics common to insurgency and towards a more conventional and rigid way of fighting akin to that of a state military. The SLA in turn adapted their military strategy, adopting a range of irregular techniques, demonstrating that counterinsurgency and conventional warfare are not mutually exclusive and can indeed be used in combination to create synergistic effects – an example of what Frank Hoffman terms ‘hybrid war’. The SLA cannot be separated from the wider political culture of entrenched Sinhala nationalism and militarism in which it exists, the contours of which for many make it a war not just against a separatist movement but in defence of the Sinhala-Buddhist homeland. This discourse considers *any* ceding of territory as an *existential* threat, irrespective of whether it topples the government. Finally, the GoSL and SLA’s failure to address the political grievances of the Tamil population is likely to imperil the prospect of a durable peace. ‘A military victory over a resilient insurgent group representing a large and mobilised ethnic community will not stand unless there is concerted and sustained political follow-through’ and ‘must be accomplished without depending or reinforcing an authoritarian political system.’^[iii] The GoSL is failing on both of these fronts. Refusal to address political demands provides oxygen to residual Tamil militancy while the increasingly authoritarian structure of governance in Sri Lanka is stirring concern across the island. Moreover, although the GoSL was able to deflect international criticism by deftly aligning itself with China and keeping the Indian government continually abreast of developments during the war, it is now drawing the opprobrium of the international community.

The GoSL faces a dilemma. Having lavishly funded the SLA during war, it now has a bloated military in peace. The ruthless manner in which Fonseka’s political ambitions were muted demonstrates the wariness felt by the government of the military assuming political power. The government should look to strengthen civilian oversight of the armed forces as a means to tackle this.^[iii] Although to date very little headway has been made on addressing the political demands of the Tamil population, this door has not yet closed. While the political will among the diaspora to resume fighting still exists, their options are limited by circumstance. In the absence of infrastructure in the formerly-LTTE controlled North, renewed Tamil militancy would lack an organised structure forcing a likely recourse to terrorism. This would alienate the West, with whom the Tamil lobby are currently winning the moral argument. The victory of the TNA in the Northern Provincial Council election—whose manifesto clearly outlines the grievances which must be addressed—has provided a fresh opportunity for the GoSL to find a political solution to the *conflict* within a federal framework that does not threaten Sri Lanka’s unitary structure. Willingness to do so will test the sincerity of Rajapaksa’s public rhetoric, but how long this window will remain open remains to be seen.

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[v] Hashim (2013).

[vi] US Army (2006), p. 1.

[vii] Kilcullen (2010), p. 1.

[viii] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[ix] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[x] Hashim (2013).

[xi] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[xii] Beehner (2010).

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[xiv] Stokke (2007), p. 1026.

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[xvii] Ibid., p. 17.

[xviii] Hashim (2013), p. 5.

[xix] Mehta (2010), p. 12.

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[xxxiii] Hoffman (2009).

[xxxiv] Ibid., pp. 53-4.

[xxxv] Rampton (2012), p. 278.

[[xxxvii](#)] Mahindapala (2010).

[[xxxviii](#)] de Mel (2007), p. 17.

[[xxxix](#)] Ibid., p. 23.

[[xl](#)] Hashim (2013), p. 75.

[[xli](#)] Hogg (2013), p. 3.

[[xlii](#)] Quoted in Hashim (2013), p. 198.

[[xliii](#)] David Galula, quoted in Hashim (2013), p. 39.

[[xliv](#)] Hashim (2013), p. 7.

[[xlv](#)] Quoted in Mehta (2010), p. 11.

[[xlvi](#)] Hogg (2013).

[[xlvii](#)] International Crisis Group (2011).

[[xlviii](#)] Srinivasan (2013).

[[xlix](#)] Tamil National Alliance (2013).

[[l](#)] Kannangara (2013).

[[ii](#)] The President now only needs the consent of a five-member council comprised of the Prime Minister, Speaker, Leader of the Opposition, and two Members of Parliament nominated by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition respectively.

[[iii](#)] Hashim (2013), p. 200.

[[iiii](#)] Hashim (2013), p. 197.

[[v](#)] Hashim (2013).

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