

FORUM

Think Like a Guerilla: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Sri Lanka

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The Roman Empire in Germania, the French in Algeria, the United States in Vietnam, and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan all conjure up the myth that insurgencies cannot be defeated. In recent years, this notion has only been reinforced by NATO's slow progress against the Taliban. Yet counterinsurgency strategies can, in fact, succeed. One of the most instructive examples is that of the Sri Lankan Army's defeat of the Tamil Tigers, one of the most violent and persistent insurgent groups of the twentieth century. The Sri Lankan military succeeded by winning democratic and popular support; isolating the insurgents diplomatically, and financially; and by transforming officer and soldier training.

This experience offers lessons for an effective, replicable counterinsurgency strategy in future conflicts.

Rise of the Tamil Insurgency

The Tamil insurgency can be traced back to ethnic tensions between Sri Lanka's majority Buddhist Sinhalese and the minority Hindu Tamils, which came to a head after the country gained independence from the British. Tensions turned violent when the Sri Lankan government declared Sinhala as sole official language and also initiated an affirmative action policy to rectify a British-era rule on university enrollment that was seen to favor the Sinhalese. The Tamil minority subsequently demanded a separate Tamil homeland. In the midst of this political conflict, Velupillai Prabhakaran consolidated control over the Tamil liberation movement by uprooting

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other Tamil militant groups and unifying the remaining militant cadres under his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealem (LTTE).

The defeat of the LTTE makes a particularly interesting case study because the organization waged one of the world's longest insurgencies, lasting nearly 33 years. For much of this period, conventional military wisdom held that the LTTE could not be defeated. At the height of its power, the LTTE controlled 15,000 square kilometers and boasted a sophisticated military, including air and sea forces capable of defeating a Sri Lankan military offense.

The LTTE gained international notoriety for pioneering the use of the suicide belt. The group executed a total of 315 suicide bombings, more than Hezbollah and Hamas put together. The Tigers were also the first to launch a suicide attack by sea in January 1999, seven months before the attack on the USS Cole. In all, the LTTE perpetrated more than 60 naval attacks between 1999 and 2008. In addition, the LTTE had a formidable fundraising network, consisting of a committed Tamil diaspora that spanned at least 44 countries and raised between \$50-\$80 million per year.



Tamil Tiger suicide bombers (Black Tigers), during a rare public display in Mullativu. Photo: Sriyantha Walpola Mobile: +1 347 684 9068

The LTTE were experts in the art of mobile warfare, with a huge cadre of highly committed soldiers who mastered their guerrilla terrain. Yet they were ultimately defeated, largely due to well-crafted strategies implemented by Sri Lankan government and military.

Strategy #1: Gain Popular Support

Insurgencies cannot be defeated by the military alone; popular political support within Sri Lanka was essential to mobilize the resources necessary to fight and win. According to Ambassador Dr. Palitha Kohona, Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations, the government held elections consistently, even in the face of spectacular LTTE attacks on key government installations. Even during the closely fought elections of 2005, when the central issue was whether to take a hard-line approach to the LTTE, the Tamil-majority provinces remained fully enfranchised. Although the electorate in those provinces was seldom able to fully participate in the elections due to a boycott enforced by the LTTE, there was at least a path available to the Tamil constituency to pursue greater freedoms through the democratic process. The fact that the LTTE had to use threats and violence against its own community to enforce the boycott resulted in the government beating the insurgents in the fight for domestic public support.

Suicide attacks on senior Sri Lankan officials, including the Defense Secretary, and failure of internationally sponsored peace initiatives helped foster public disillusionment, further draining LTTE's popular support. But ultimately it was the democratic nature of the Sri Lankan government that enabled it to successfully marshal public opinion to accept the human losses and financial costs of a sustained military campaign.

More tellingly, the government held provincial elections within 10 months of capturing Sri Lanka's Eastern Province from the LTTE. This move stands in stark contrast to other counterinsurgencies, where governments have delayed democracy in favor of stabilization, thereby losing valuable time and sowing unrest amongst the population.

Strategy #2: Fight like a Guerrilla

Coupled with its efforts to ensure broad-based support from the larger public, the government spearheaded a rethinking of military culture to better combat insurgents. Major General Shavendra Silva, former Director

of Military Operations and commander of the 58th Division of the Sri Lankan Army, commented that success was the result of tapping operational commanders who had substantial warfare experience and giving them the freedom to operate independently on the battlefield.

There was a cultural shift from conventional military thinking to one that adopted unconventional and guerrilla methods — a shift that percolated down from the Defense Secretary to the front-line soldiers. One example of such unconventional thinking was the 58th Division's battlefield decision to use reinforced mortar casings to float soldiers across flooded fields instead of boats, which are noisy and prone to ambush. This allowed the army to regain the element of surprise.

In addition, the infantry training doctrine was revamped to constitute special infantry operations teams (SIOTs). These eight-man groups received extensive specialized training in jungle warfare, explosives, and communications, allowing them to penetrate deep into hostile territory, employ hit-and-run tactics against enemy forces, and direct artillery and air strikes. Furthermore, the placement of SIOTs alongside regular infantry units helped diffuse special warfare skills and lift the standards of regular infantry soldiers.

The use of SIOTs to launch focused attacks inflicted maximum damage on the insurgents while avoiding large-scale casualties. The surprising change in tactics had a psychological impact as well: LTTE commanders were immobilized and had to restrict their movements to safe grounds, depriving their troops of frontline leadership.

Strategy #3: Diplomatic and Financial Isolation of the Insurgents

The government needed to erode one additional key pillar of the LTTE's strength — their support overseas. The aforementioned Tamil diaspora provided financial backing as well as international legitimacy to the insurgents. At its peak, the LTTE's fundraising network brought in more than \$200 million per year. The global Tamil community also promoted LTTE's cause by lobbying foreign governments, particularly the Indian government, which had a sizeable Tamil population in the Southern provinces.

The Tigers were effective at defining themselves as freedom fighters in the eyes of the world, influencing the public narrative through media, art, and cultural activities. The fusion of Tamil identity and the Tamil's cause was perhaps best embodied by the rapper M.I.A., whose lyrics are viewed as politically inspired and supporting the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Such perceptions created a challenge for Sri Lanka's diplomats charged with curtailing the LTTE's funding and gaining international support for disrupting their efficient arms smuggling network.

Much as the assassinations of Sri Lankan officials had colored domestic political opinion, the LTTE's 1991 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began to change the tide of public opinion internationally. Sri Lankan diplomats took advantage of the post-9/11 anti-terror atmosphere, and through long-term initiatives such as giving foreign ambassadors tours of Tamil territory and LTTE attacks, they eventually convinced 32 countries to designate the LTTE a terrorist organization. The loss of foreign support and legitimacy internationally played a pivotal role in the LTTE's loss of legitimacy at home. It also rendered fundraising more difficult.

Sri Lankan diplomats were most effective in shrewdly balancing their military's armament needs, which were fulfilled by China and Pakistan, with the cultivation of diplomatic support from India, where the LTTE had strong roots. This balancing act was done through extensive military, diplomatic, and political contacts with India to address its concerns about the future of the Tamil minority and to secure its support in disrupting LTTE's smuggling and financing network.

It is widely believed that the Sri Lankan army withheld the final assault on LTTE's leadership until after the elections in May 2009 in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, though Sri Lankan officials deny it. The Sri Lankan government's sensitivity to a potential Tamil backlash in India was an astute strategy. It avoided a re-run of 1987, when an Indian intervention in Sri Lanka on behalf of the Tamils brought an end to a successful offensive operation.

Strategy #4: Divide and Rule

In addition to severing the Tigers' ties to foreign backers, the Sri Lankan government sought to incite division within the organization itself. The LTTE achieved dominance over rival Tamil resistance groups in 1986 by

violently subduing or incorporating rival separatist groups. Its grasp only loosened in 2004 when the Sri Lankan government engineered the defection of Colonel Karuna, the key LTTE commander in the Eastern Province. He believed the LTTE leadership from the Northern Province was marginalizing him and Eastern Province Tamils, and by offering him immunity from prosecution and protection from his former LTTE comrades, the Sri Lankan government neutralized a key operational commander and his six thousand troops. The subsequent internal warfare weakened the remainder of the LTTE and substantially reduced recruitment from the Eastern Province.

Although Colonel Karuna had acted out of self-preservation, his credibility as a former rebel leader provided the Tamil population with a non-violent alternative to the LTTE. His organizing of a Tamil political party — and later being named Sri Lanka’s minister for national integration — added to his image of legitimacy. The most significant contribution of this breakaway faction, however, was accurate intelligence and on-the-ground



In a rare photo, former female Tamil Tiger leader “Bhanu” shows the Cyanide capsule she wore to commit suicide in the event of capture. Photo: Sriyantha Walpoloa. Mobile: +1 347 684 9068.

reconnaissance for the Sri Lankan military offensive in the Eastern Province in 2007. Some sources allege that Colonel Karuna’s troops also fought alongside the Sri Lankan Army — which, if true, would have added an important psychological advantage for the Sri Lankan army.

In April, a three member UN Secretary General's Panel of Experts on Sri Lanka found credible allegations of war crimes committed by both sides during the final stages of the armed conflict. It is imperative that the alleged war crimes are properly investigated to advance accountability for any violation of international law. Governments have a greater responsibility to exercising restraint and targeting of civilian infrastructure cannot be condoned. However, in situations when political channels for resolving a conflict have been exhausted, there are other key counterinsurgency

lessons that can be drawn from the success of the Sri Lanka's campaign against the LTTE.

Lesson #1: Democracy works. Refrain from imposing emergency controls that curtail democratic representation; ensure that legitimate local elections occur regularly in insurgent territory. **Don't wait for stability;** when insurgent areas are captured, devolve power to the local level at the earliest opportunity.

Conventional wisdom holds that authoritarian regimes are better equipped to fight insurgencies due to unity of command. It may be true that authoritarian regimes are effective in the short term, but it takes years if not decades to quell serious insurgencies. In the long term, democratic systems are more effective in managing the tensions generated by internal conflict and also bringing disparate groups on board.

In the country of the insurgency (for example, in Afghanistan), devolution of power to the local and provincial levels is most effective in garnering public support for a protracted and deadly campaign. Quick local and provincial elections after an area has been cleared of insurgents have the added benefit of strengthening a constituency within the hostile group that seeks a democratic alternative to violence. Democratic structures are also essential in reaching a permanent peace settlement at the end of an insurgency.

Of course, democratic representation need not entail a western-style, election-based system. It could be a tribal jirga, or a system that reflects the opinion and interests of the local population. By all accounts, the success of the Iraqi Surge was largely due to ownership and participation in the fighting by the Sons of Iraq, a group that represented local interests in the Al-Anbar province. The Sons of Iraq-aligned political groups went on to win the largest number of seats in Al-Anbar province in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Lesson #2: Empower the military to adapt to guerrilla warfare. Create smaller fighting units. Devolve authority to independent battlefield commanders and place greater emphasis on terrain-specific training for junior officers. Employ specialized guerrilla units alongside conventional infantry.

In order to fight an insurgency, conventional armies must adopt some of the guerrilla strategies of their enemies, including small formations, deep penetration into hostile territory, and hit-and-run surprise attacks. In the case of Sri Lanka, the SIOTs organized Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols to intercept and eliminate key LTTE field commanders and fortifications, thereby disorienting the insurgents.

To date, one element of US counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan has been to train a large number of Afghan army soldiers. As a result, the size of the Afghan National Army has increased from 1,750 in 2003 to 134,000 in 2010. However, it is plagued by lack of discipline and desertion and has a poor track record in fighting the Taliban. The Sri Lankan experience would suggest that quality rather than quantity is most important. Therefore, a rigorous training program, such as the eighteen weeks of terrain-specific warfare training in addition to the regular infantry training, should be instituted to create a smaller but more disciplined Afghan SIOT force that is capable of fighting in small units and conducting hit-and-run attacks deep in hostile territory.

Lesson #3: Engage internationally. Focus political, military, and diplomatic contacts at the highest level with key neighboring countries to build confidence. Show sensitivity to protect neighbors' strategic interests.

Neighboring countries play a role in internal conflicts. An insurgency is unlikely to be defeated if it retains external financial or manpower resources. During the offensive, the Sri Lankan government maintained constant diplomatic and political contacts with the Indian government, providing assurances that India's strategic interests in Sri Lanka would be protected and that the grievances of the ordinary Tamils would be addressed. This outreach made the Indian government more willing to sustain the internal pressure from its own Tamil electorate to stop the Sri Lankan offensive and also participate in jointly coordinated, anti-smuggling navy missions.

In the case of Afghanistan, the implementation of this recommendation is complicated by the distrust between Pakistan and the United States as well as between Pakistan and Afghanistan. But the Sri Lankan relationship with India shows us that such distrust can be overcome through comprehensive political, diplomatic, and military engagement. Confidence building measures would be an Afghanistan-Pakistan non-aggression pact —joined

under the auspices of the United States — that disallows the use of land and resources of either country to undermine the other and a final settlement of the Durand Line, the contentious border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Joint training sessions of diplomats, parliamentarians, and military personnel, supplementing existing military exchange programs, could also help build an environment of trust between the three countries.

Lesson #4: Co-opt at the top. Initiate defection of key operational or regional commanders rather than foot soldiers.

Capitalizing on reported ethnic fissures or power struggles within the insurgents or between different insurgent organizations to create defection of commanders has the advantage of not only bringing in their loyal troops but also providing key ground intelligence to government forces.

In Afghanistan, significant military and psychological impact can be achieved from the defection of key provincial commanders, especially those that are loosely aligned with the Taliban. The coalition troops have tried to cause defections, but with only limited success given that such initiatives were seen as foreign-led. The recent creation of the High Council for Peace in Afghanistan — comprised of intellectuals, tribal and religious leaders, and former Mujahedeen commanders and Taliban members — is a more effective strategy for giving an Afghan face to the reconciliation process. This council should be supplemented by provincial reconciliation committees that can tap into indigenous knowledge of tribal tensions to cut power-sharing deals with commanders at the local and regional level.

Caveats and Conclusions

To be sure, each counterinsurgency has unique dynamics rooted in the history of the conflict and the existing political structures. Each situation, therefore, must be analyzed on its individual characteristics. Particularly in the case of the U.S. fighting an insurgency in Afghanistan, implementation of these lessons could be complicated by the lack of consent from the Afghan government. Moreover, insurgencies never happen in a vacuum, and addressing the root causes that led to the uprising in the first place will often be much more effective than any military action. In the case of the Tamils, they had genuine grievances in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, in the case of intractable insurgencies that use terror as a weapon and reject political solutions, there are important lessons from the Sri Lankan experience that other governments may be able to apply in their own counter-insurgency strategies. Specifically, governments must treat the political war as seriously as the military one, maintaining a commitment to democracy and engaging other countries that might be inclined to back the insurgents. In the Sri Lankan experience, there was significant violence committed by both sides and the loss of life — at least on the Sri Lankan side — could not have been sustained without broad domestic support.

On the military end of the struggle, a counterinsurgency needs a better-trained and more intelligent army that can act and fight like a guerrilla force. In addition, co-opting regional insurgent commanders and rehabilitating them into the democratic process can have a psychological impact that discourages rank-and-file insurgents.

Only by having a nuanced, multi-pronged strategy that uses all instruments of state power — fusing diplomatic and political strategies with military ones — can a long-lasting insurgency be defeated.