



## Achieving Success in Counter-Insurgency

- The Rajapaksa Model and the Defeat of the Tamil Tigers -

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### Abstract

In the first few months of 2009, thousands of innocent civilians were killed as the Sri Lankan government besieged the notorious Tamil Tigers, after a brutal struggle that had lasted for almost thirty years. Sri Lanka claimed that the victory was the product of the “Rajapaksa Model” of counter-insurgency (COIN), but many western theorists disputed this claim and put Sri Lanka’s success down to an opportunistic reaction to a unique set of events. This paper investigates whether Sri Lanka’s defeat of the LTTE is an example of genuine COIN success by analyzing the causes of the conflict and more specifically the factors that had up until then prevented its resolution. Finally, it investigates why the “Rajapaksa Model” led to the defeat of the world’s foremost terrorist group. This paper argues that Sri Lanka’s victory in this case is not as a genuine COIN campaign because it failed to build on the military victory and did not address the underlying causes of the conflict. The “Rajapaksa Model” of COIN provided a remedy rather than a cure.

**Key words:** counter-insurgency, Sri Lanka, Tamil, LTTE, Rajapaksa model

### 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka was in many ways the jewel of the British Empire in the immediate post world war period, and was possibly the one post-independence state that successfully navigated a peaceful course from colonialism to indigenous government (De Silva, 1998: 300). Although ethnic divisions and occasional outbreaks of violence had been present in Sri Lanka for many centuries and most noticeably

with the arrival of significant numbers of Tamils in the nineteenth century; it had been carefully managed by European pragmatism. This delicate but relatively successful balancing act became severely tested by an upsurge of Sinhalese nationalism and symbolically, the passage of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which purported to address the disproportionate Tamil influence in government. In fact, the act became a tool for widespread racial discrimination. Once Pandora’s Box had been opened, a cycle of violence descended

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onto this idyllic Indian Ocean paradise, and although the language of liberal democracy was still freely used, a dark underworld of state sponsored violence thrived. It was against this backdrop that a civil war spanning three decades emerged between the Government of Sri Lanka and the self-anointed representatives of the Tamil people, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam(LTTE).

This paper will investigate the history and nature of the conflict since independence in order to better understand the nature of the insurgency that arose. Did the Sri Lankan Government employ a genuine COIN strategy based on a deep understanding of socio-economic factors or were they merely reacting to events? The “Rajapaksa model” for defeating insurgency has been touted as an example of best practice and this claim will be scrutinised against wider established COIN theory. This line of questioning will also test another controversial issue; whether COIN is an appropriate strategy to employ in a conflict based on identity politics. This relatively new political scene has its roots across a wide range of influences: “some are separatist nationalist movements, some represent historically oppressed minorities which demand equal rights... some are religious, some are ethnic and some are regional...many see identity politics as a strategy of exclusion and an ideology of hatred (Eriksen, 1999).”

The UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution, which was highly critical of Sri Lanka’s record in the last few months of the war against the Tamil Tigers (BBC News, 2013) but the Government should not stand in the dock alone. If any of the Tiger leadership had been allowed to survive the brutal destruction that took place in

the Nandikaladal Lagoon in the dying days of the conflict, they too would have faced accusations of extreme brutality and Human Rights abuses. This paper will examine the part played by the Tigers and consider whether the Sri Lankan Government was left with any option but to remove the source of enduring instability. In doing so, it emphasises the importance of understanding how a series of events created by the actions of the international community created an opportunity for the Rajapaksa regime to unleash a critical blow to the Tigers’ centre of gravity.

Finally, the limitations of the Sri Lankan approach will be assessed. For Example, somewhat ironically, the overwhelming mandate that the people of Sri Lanka rewarded Rajapaksa with, following the defeat of the Tigers, was used to centralise power rather than create an enduring environment of peace and stability. Even with such faults accounted for, it would be wrong to criticise the Sri Lanka model without offering some form of constructive criticism and/or alternative strategy based on other COIN experiences in the post war era. It would also be unfair to label the Sri Lankan approach an outright failure, particularly given the widespread public support for any form of respite after three decades of conflict. However, as Stefan Wolff argues “the provision of security extends not only to ensuring that all hostilities between former conflict parties cease, but also that no other forms of violence persist or emerge (Wolff, 2006: 165).”

The Rajapaksa government successfully achieved a brutal but nonetheless impressive military victory over the military wing of Tamil separatism but failed to address the underlying causes of the

insurgency. Insurgencies and especially those underwritten by identity politics have the capacity to lay dormant for many years and it is not until a complete strategy of post-conflict reconstruction is addressed that Sri Lanka can genuinely claim success.

## II. History of Tamil Insurgency

Ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils is a Twentieth Century manifestation of an age-old rivalry (De Silva, 1998: 300). The Sinhalese are considerably outnumbered by a ratio exceeding six to one within Sri Lanka and yet bizarrely these numerically superior odds have failed to deliver a sense of security because the ratio is turned on its head when the Tamils across South Asia and in particular Tamilnadu in India are taken into account. The Sinhalese see themselves as the final guardians of Theravada Buddhism, which was persecuted on the mainland by an oppressive Indian Hindu majority. De Silva argued that “if the Sinhalese were, and are insecure because of the burden of history and memories of the past, the Tamils are insecure because of fears for their future (De Silva, 1998: 302).” In part, this analysis throws some light on the Sinhalese desire to force the pace of change rather than allow the natural balance to evolve. The unique situation in Sri Lanka is that the ruling majority had developed a minority complex, whilst the minority coveted a disproportionate yearning for majority status (De Silva, 1998: 304).

Although the Sri Lankan conflict was characterised by the ethnic differences between the Sinhalese and Tamil people, both were in fact

migrants to the island, displacing the original Hera settlers. Over time, a steady but less dramatic influx of Muslims added to the cocktail, creating a heady mixture of three of the world’s most prominent religions; Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam (Munck and de Silva, 2000: 167). Numerous disputes and conflicts between these groups littered the early history of Sri Lanka and on occasion, brief alliances were formed to counter threats from the Indian mainland. Interestingly, religious disputes between the Sinhalese and Tamils were not a prominent feature of this rich history although this exception does not apply to Christians and Buddhists. The foundations of the modern conflict are no doubt rooted in these historical differences but it is the decades either side of independence that primarily defined the character of the Twentieth Century Tamil insurgency.

By the late 1920s, the Tamils had developed a strong understanding with the British administration and had manoeuvred themselves into a disproportionate position of influence. A commendable work ethic and high literacy rates marked Tamils out as superior civil service candidates to the more populous Sinhalese. This imbalance was noted by the Soulbury Commission of 1945, which “highlighted that the Ceylon Tamils occupied a disproportionate number of posts in Public Service s...but also that there was also a Sinhalese desire to challenge this stranglehold (De Silva, 1998: 314).” As D. S. Senayake was elected as the first Prime Minister of the newly independent Ceylon<sup>1</sup>, so murmurings of discontent began to surface at the retention of power by the urbane, educated English speaking Colombo elites (Weiss, 2012: 35).

1) Soon to be renamed Sri Lanka.

Over the next few years, his United National Party(UNP) failed to accommodate widespread feelings of Sinhalese disenfranchisement, which in time gave rise to an embryonic Buddhist nationalist movement. The opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party seized upon the potential for a nationalist mandate and in 1956, their outspoken leader Bandaranaike was elected under the electoral slogan of “Sinhala in twenty four hours.” He consolidated his victory by rushing through the Sinhala Only Act, which was designed to redress the balance of influence across the Sri Lankan administration in favour of the Sinhalese. In fact, it became a rallying cry for Buddhist nationalism, unleashing a brand of ethnic violence that legitimised state sponsored Tamil discrimination and persecution.

Paradoxically, it also came to symbolise Tamil oppression, which in turn spawned modern Tamil separatism. Initially this movement was represented by a number of diverse Tamil groups however one group launched a ruthless internecine campaign of dominance from the Jaffna Peninsula. By the early 1980s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam(LTTE) had established themselves as *primus inter pares* and under the charismatic but brutal leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran hijacked the mainstream separatist movement. The modus operandi of LTTE and the cult status of Prabhakaran are key factors in the character of the insurgency and the government response; as such they will be afforded further consideration in subsequent chapters. The LTTE announced its intentions to the international community on 23 July 1983, with a ferocious attack on an army outpost in Jaffna, killing all thirteen occupants. The ensuing spiral of violence marked the start of a thirty year Manichaeon struggle that

would bring the pearl of the Indian Ocean to its knees.

### III. COIN Theory

The primary problem for this paper is to consider whether or not the Sri Lankan Government’s response to the Tamil insurgency constitutes a genuine COIN campaign. Prior to answering this question, it is important to re-state a widely held observation that no two insurgencies are the same. It therefore follows that no two responses should necessarily be the same, which makes any assessment of success relatively subjective.

Although this may well be true, there is a well-stocked repository of theory and experience painfully collated on the back of numerous failures and occasional success. Colonel David Galula, a French officer who served in the Algerian War made two simple observations— firstly, that COIN is about protecting the population and not about killing the enemy. Second, that political power should always be afforded primacy over military power (Marston & Malkasian, 2008: 14). These themes were also echoed in Sir Robert Thompson’s seminal work “Defeating Communist Insurgency” following his experiences in Malaya. He identified five principles which focused on the legitimate use of force by the government (Thompson, 1972: 124):

1. The government must have a clear political aim
2. The government must function within the law
3. The government must have an overall plan
4. The government must give overall priority to defeating the political subversion not the

guerrillas.

5. In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, it must secure its base first.

David Kilcullen, the Chief Strategist of the Office of Counter-Terrorism in the US State Department, argued that all models are systematic oversimplifications of reality but at the same time noted the importance of enduring themes, which should be at the forefront of campaign design (Kilcullen, 2006). Insurgencies are rooted in the social political landscape and consequently demand a strong understanding of the human and political terrain. In many cases, political compromise rather than total military victory characterises success and it has been suggested that tactical brilliance translates into very little when the wider social and political context is ignored or misinterpreted (Marston & Malkasian, 2008: 16). It is this precise charge that has been levelled at the Sri Lankan Government; winning the battle is not the same as securing the peace and although the LTTE were effectively destroyed, the issue of Tamil political aspirations remained unanswered.<sup>2)</sup>

Kilcullen argued that re-establishing “control” is paramount but should not necessarily be imposed through unquestioned dominance. Instead it should be sought through achieving collaboration towards a set of shared objectives. Destroying the enemy is merely one of many objectives and, as Thompson and Galula have argued, should always be secondary to the re-imposition of political primacy. Politically, the more force that is used, the worse the campaign is going (Kilcullen, 2006: 3).

Kilcullen developed a “three pillar” model, based

around politics, security and the economy but importantly he identified information as the critical requirement because perception is needed to win and maintain influence over population groups. “Unless the pillars are developed in parallel, the campaign will become imbalanced: too much economic assistance with inadequate security simply creates an array of soft targets...too much security assistance without political consensus simply creates more capable armed groups...progress should be measured by gauging effectiveness and legitimacy (Kilcullen, 2006: 5).”

The key observations laid out in this chapter are a useful start point but must be kept in perspective and the unique nature and circumstances of the Sri Lankan conflict and the roles played by the opposing forces must be examined with an open mind. Both sides enjoyed significant success and although the government gained the ultimate stunning military victory.

#### IV. The Rajapaksa Model

Van Creveld has compared the role of the state controlling insurgencies with the analogy of an adult in a fight with a child. Regardless of who started the fight or how well armed the child is, the adult will always feel that they are acting unjustly if they harm the child and foolish if the child harms them. He argues that a strong counter-insurgent who uses his strength to harm a smaller insurgent group and the population which shields them is committing an unjust crime. By contrast, a child who is in a serious fight with an adult is justified in using every, and any means

2) In the interests of balance, the Sri Lankan response will be considered in the subsequent chapter.

possible, not because he is right but because he has no choice (Van Creveld, 2008: 226). The problem with the Sri Lankan situation is at times, such was the professionalism and equipment programme of the Tigers, that it was difficult to tell the difference between the adult and the child.

In order to address criticisms that the Sri Lankan Government did not have follow a COIN model and instead reacted to events at the tactical level, it held a symposium in May 2010. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the then Defence Minister, one time Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) Lieutenant Colonel and more importantly, brother of the President, opened the conference under the impressive boast: "Defeating Terrorism, The Sri Lankan Experience." The template, which was also labelled the "Rajapaksa Model" after the President, emphasised the use of overwhelming military force, followed by an economic prophylactic, which in turn would obviate the need for a political settlement.

The model has since been laid out by Shashikumar with the observation that it focuses on the tactical application of force at the expense of a genuine strategy. He identified eight, fundamental pillars, and several (highlighted in bold font) in particular underline the unique character of the Sri Lankan approach and are worthy of further analysis (Shashikumar, 2009: 27). Mahinda Rajapaksa provided a level of unwavering political support from the government that had not been previously afforded to the campaign. After 30 years of perceived government failure and over one hundred thousand casualties, anything less than outright success was likely to undermine his ruling mandate and he therefore made it clear that the SLAF would receive all the support that they required, whatever

the cost. The Ministry of Defence was identified as the lead, and for most of the time, was the only department responsible for the campaign.

Rajapaksa ignored domestic and international criticism of the campaign from the start and cultivated a unique set of circumstances, which created the operating space for the Sri Lankan military to launch a brutal campaign against the Tamil Tigers. These factors will be examined in the subsequent chapter on external factors, but they included international top cover from China and later India. Rajapaksa also cleverly exploited the international condemnation of terrorism post 9/11, which effectively put a noose around the international funding and support for the Tigers. Rajapaksa accepted that it was essential to create a media exclusion zone around the military offensive in order to avoid international outrage and pressure to desist. This blackout was effective in supporting the defeating of the military insurgency but should have then been lifted in support of post conflict reconstruction, this short-term outlook is a common criticism levelled against the model. It also forms the basis of one argument that the Sri Lankan model is not an example of genuine COIN because it fails to look beyond the initial military offensive. The Sri Lankan government and people were wary of previous LTTE peace initiatives and were now certain that under the single minded leadership of Prabhakaran; the objective was nothing short of Tamil self-determination and therefore ruled out any return to a ceasefire and further negotiations (Shashikumar, 2009: 28). The sum total of these parts guaranteed the military complete operational freedom, which was essential for the ultimate

destruction of the LTTE military machine.

In practice, Shashikumar's articulation of the model fails to acknowledge many of the strategic levers that the Sri Lanka government employed against the insurgency. In particular the government worked hard to exploit the cracks between rival Tamil organisations within the overall Tiger umbrella. Prabhakaran had used the relative calm of the ceasefire agreement to consolidate his position by murdering potential rivals and dissidents. Colonel Karuna, an influential Tamil leader in the Eastern Provinces criticised this approach and no doubt wary of the likely retribution accepted Rajapaksa's offer of position, influence and security. In effect this defection unlocked a goldmine of information and made a significant dent in the armour of Prabhakaran's cult status. The Army Commander, General Sareth Fonseka would later credit this coup as one of the significant turning points of the conflict.

Prior to the turn of the millennium, the Tigers enjoyed considerable freedom of movement within the wider region, which they exploited to raise money, move personnel and smuggle arms and equipment into the country. Despite his single minded reputation, Rajapaksa displayed a cunning grasp of international diplomacy in his dealings with India, who by this stage had grown weary of the de-stabilising influence to their south. India agreed to help isolate the Tigers and effectively closed the Palk Straits, which had been a profitable and essential route for illicit trading and movement. Beckett noted that "those insurgents most likely to succeed were those enjoying substantial assistance and ready refuge across an international frontier (Beckett, 2005: 24)."

Although the publicised model does not take into account all of these additional factors, they do little to counter the argument that the model was focused on military victory rather than building towards a long term political solution. Although premature and based, at this stage on the actions of only one player, it is useful to return to Thompson's five principles, which are not definitive but offer a widely accepted generic start point, and briefly evaluate the "Rajapaksa model".

At various stages throughout the thirty year conflict, political aims have been present but by the time that Rajapaksa's government held the reins, Sri Lanka's patience had worn thin. There was no unifying political aim that sat above the clear military objective; the destruction of the Tamil Tigers was the sole purpose of the campaign. The persuasive Buddhist influence on the government coupled with a war fatigued electorate ensured that Tamil self-determination was not considered as a viable political concept. The government did not function within the law and stood accused of war crimes by an outraged international community but those accusations failed to acknowledge the exceeding brutality of the Tamil campaign. The nature of the conflict and escalation of violence suggests that the government did not have an overall plan but merely reacted to a series of tactical engagements. This should not be regarded as a criticism against the military, which executed a brutal yet clinical pincer movement that surrounded and choked the Tigers military forces.

The conduct of the war should have been regulated and the government should have rose above Tiger war crimes in order to win the consent

of the Tamil population trapped within the crises rather than resort to an eye-for-an-eye approach. It is important not to lose sight of the majority Sinhalese view, which after nearly thirty years of conflict and numerous failed negotiations, complete military victory represented an unattractive but tolerable course of action (Weiss, 2012: xxiv).

## V. The Role of the LTTE

If the central question is whether Sri Lanka's defeat of the LTTE represents genuine COIN success, then an equally important question should be whether the LTTE represents a genuine insurgency. One already identified criticism levelled at the Sri Lankan government is that they reacted to events rather than dictate them. If this is true then it is quite possible that Sri Lanka's merciless campaign was developed in response to an even more ferocious uprising; thus creating a vicious circle, this played out in the Tamil areas to the north, known as the Vanni.

Pollack argued that if a government seeks out battle then the initiative remains with the insurgent, who can then set their own level of casualties (Pollack, 2005). The classic Maoist insurgency model would suggest that this should be just enough to keep the issue alive but not so many as to become engaged in full battles. Under the aggressive leadership of Prabhakaran, the Tigers dressed, looked and trained like a conventional army and often acted like one on the battlefield. This was initially sustainable when money and equipment poured in from across the wealthy network of Tamil supporters but not post

9/11, when international opinion turned against any form of terrorism. The Tamil Tigers were almost too well equipped for their own narrative, and were widely recognised as the only insurgent group in the world, with a separate navy and air force. The air force was little more than a propaganda exercise but the navy maintained a genuine capability and conducted successful raids on the Sri Lankan fleet and naval infrastructure. Unsurprisingly it was the land forces<sup>3)</sup> that carried the brunt of the campaign, launching an unrelenting series of attacks of unprecedented scale in revolutionary warfare. In 1985, Tiger cadres stormed the town of Anuradhapura, killing 146 civilians and in 1990, 600 police officers were executed around the town of Kalmurai. These were not the classic small scale hit and run tactics favoured by insurgents but large scale tactical engagements executed by an organised military force. As a result, it is relatively unsurprising that the military response focused on a conventional solution rather than a political one. This perception of the Tamil Tigers as aggressors was not lost on the international community and is reflected in a statement by the US Under Secretary for Asia, Nicholas Burns in 2006: "we have faith in the government and President of Sri Lanka. They do want to make peace...we also believe that the LTTE is a terrorist group responsible for massive bloodshed in the country and we hold the Tamil Tigers responsible for much of what has gone wrong in the country...we support the government."

The eminence of personality and leadership is hugely important in Sri Lanka and the cult of personality that developed around Velupillai Prabhakaran is testament to this observation. Born

3) The use of this term and the principles of compency demonstrates the scale of the Tamil military.

on the Jaffna peninsula in 1954, he developed revolutionary tendencies and spent his youth travelling around the north inciting political unrest. He became a model of persistent brutality and single mindedness endowed with a sense of personal historic mission(Weiss, 2012: 75). From the late 1970's, he helped to establish the LTTE to a position of dominance by annexing, intimidating or ultimately murdering all of his opponents. The massacre of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation(TELO) and its leader, Sri Sabaratnam in 1986 was a particularly sadistic act of internecine warfare(Coakley, 2002: 153). Over the course of his lifetime, in constant armed conflict with the Sinhalese, he developed an intractable belief that the government could not be trusted and that only armed conflict would deliver Tamil self-determination(Weiss, 2012: 76).

The critical importance of leaders who are prepared to recognise and develop opportunities as the start point for negotiations is paramount. As Coakley observed "opportunities are merely the start point of negotiations, which require tolerance, patience and skilful statesmanship to exploit... success depends on the coming together of leaders with a vision of peace and the authority of their community(Coakley, 2002: 154)." There was little chance of reconciliation taking place in Sri Lanka, under the dogmatic leadership of Prabhakaran and Rajapaksa. It is quite possible that both understood the relative position of their counterpart and as a result embarked on a zero sum game approach.

It is this "all or nothing" mentality that helped to spawn a dark suicidal culture within the Tamil Tigers. A cult inner circle of Tamil warriors called the Black Tigers was established in the 1980s and

because their ambition and targeting was not constrained by concerns for preservation, proved to be incredibly potent. Recruits were selected from the very best of Tamil youth and there were no shortage of volunteers for the most dangerous and high profile missions. Their audacious attacks included the assassinations of a number of high profile targets, including former Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and the Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premasada. The LTTE developed an impressive propaganda machine to celebrate these sacrifices, including the establishment of elaborate cemeteries throughout Tamil held areas(Weiss, 2012: 86). These images of sacrifice were a constant reminder to the domestic and international Tamil communities of their struggle against the Sinhalese government. This stark propaganda also had an effect on the government forces, who were left in no doubt that their enemy were fanatics and would not surrender or negotiate. It is more understandable that young soldiers saw limited value in principles of courageous restraint, when faced with such a threat. These tactical concerns also played out on the strategic stage and following the September 2001 attacks on the US mainland by Islamic extremists, international opinion firmly shifted the LTTE into the terrorist camp. The Sri Lankan government cleverly picked up the Washington lexicon and in apparent alignment with the Western world condemned the LTTE to pariah status. The once heroic deeds of the Black Tigers very quickly became subhuman rather than super-human(Weiss, 2012: 79).

## VI. COIN Applicability to Identity Politics

The US COIN manual defines insurgency in

political terms and states that: “insurgencies... normally seek to overthrow the existing social order and reallocate power within a single state, or break away from state control and form an autonomous entity or ungoverned space that they can control(HQ Department of the U.S. Army, 2006: 1-2).” With this context in mind, it is worth returning to the question posed at the start of the last chapter; whether the LTTE were a genuine insurgent movement or motivated by more fundamental aims based on identity politics. In such circumstances and spurred by primeval tendencies, is a political settlement a genuine possibility or merely a distraction that legitimises the underlying causes of the dispute?

The LTTE had several opportunities to embrace political settlements throughout the conflict and although it is reasonable to accept that not all were viable or generous offers, the fact that none warranted serious consideration is concerning. President Kumaratunga pushed for a constitutional reform bill in 2000, which would have provided some political representation for the Tamils but a lack of genuine support from the LTTE meant that she had to backtrack in order to protect her own powerbase(Ganguly, 2004: 904). Her successor, Wickremesinghe also represented “a new generation of political leadership that was less concerned with ethno-religious nationalism...and placed more emphasis on peace and prosperity in the context of globalisation(Ganguly, 2004: 907).” This commitment was reinforced by a visit to Jaffna in March, 2002, the first by a Sri Lankan premier in twenty years, but the LTTE failed to offer any conciliatory progress leaving Wickremesinghe isolated on the domestic stage. The Tamil Tigers

reluctance to negotiate reflected a wider trend that characterised conflicts based on identity politics. Wolff argued that settlements and peace deals signed in good faith are many but those that lead to stable peace are far fewer(Wolff, 2006: 7).

This observation potentially adds further weight to the argument that the Sri Lankan government were entitled not to pursue a conventional COIN campaign because the underlying causes of the conflict were not solely based on political imperatives. This is a radical conclusion based on a small section of the evidence and Wolff might argue that the political settlement is of limited importance as a stand-alone initiative, and the post-conflict reconstruction phase is integral to the conflict settlement process(Wolff, 2006: 153). This analysis is critical and although the Sri Lankan government were not in a viable position to negotiate with the LTTE, it should not have rejected any feasibility of conducting post-conflict settlement with the wider Tamil population. It is also important to note that the government had to manage the views of an influential nationalist lobby within the Sinhalese population who would have opposed any form of negotiation as a matter of principle(De Silva, 1998: 312). In simple terms, the “Rajapaksa model” grouped all Tamils as insurgents represented by the extreme tactics and rhetoric of LTTE and thus decided that a political element to the COIN campaign was destined to failure, favouring a purist military campaign instead. The fact that the LTTE was forced to use extreme brutality to coerce the wider Tamil population points to an opportunity that was not exploited by the government to separate the insurgent from its popular support.

## VII. External Factors

Having examined some of the underlying causes of the conflict, it is now important to analyse some of the external influences and factors that helped shape the insurgency and more importantly, Rajapaksa's response to it. Sri Lanka confidently touts the "Rajapaksa Model" as a method for solving internal conflict, without the involvement of the international community and this reflects a loss of patience within Sri Lanka of what it perceived as superficial western liberal intervention. Lewis argued that "many countries, including Brazil, China, Russia, India and Indonesia have tended to support a revision to pre-1991 norms, supporting maximalist understandings of state sovereignty and resisting norms that constrain particular ways in which force is used inside state borders(Lewis, 2010: 658)." It is reasonable to argue that Sri Lanka's final response to the 30 year insurgency was not only based on conditions within Sri Lanka but also set against a backdrop of shifting influences on the global stage.

Another significant external factor, which encapsulates the shifting sands in the international world order, is the "Great Game" being played out between the USA and China in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to recognise the People's Republic of China in 1949 and has cultivated a relationship carefully over many decades. This early diplomatic investment has yielded significant economic dividends, and the commissioning of a billion dollar deep sea port in Rajapaksa's impoverished hometown of Hambantota had boosted ties and underlined China's commitment. China reinforced its investment with a demonstration

of significant diplomatic support, effectively blocking any international action that sought to moderate Sri Lanka's bloodletting in the final phase of the conflict(Weiss, 2012: xxiii). Weiss argued that the conflict became a footnote in the new balancing of power between the USA and China. It is "symptomatic of the new Beijing Consensus that countries such as Sri Lanka can achieve economic prosperity underwritten by China, without the inconvenience of domestic political freedoms, still pushed by western allies(Weiss, 2012: xxv)." This observation gains some credibility from China and Russia's subsequent standoff with the international community over Syria and reinforces the "coming powers" belief in the importance of self-determination and non-interventionism.

It is too simplistic to merely re-hash Cold War, East versus West polarity in order to understand the reason that Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka followed a certain path. Indeed, as previously mentioned, it was the USA's Global War on Terror(GWOT) that signalled the death knell of the LTTE's global network of fundraising and illicit trading. As the International Red Cross observed, "the global reaction against terror has reinforced the right of governments to use it(Weiss, 2012: xxi)." Prabhakaran either failed to respond to this change or as is more likely, given his fanatical devotion to the cause, completely ignored the warning signs. The Sri Lankan government had responded sympathetically to the Norwegian brokered Cease Fire Agreement, and following a period of relative stability in 2006/07, it was the Tigers who blinked first. Both sides used the intervening period to rehabilitate tired forces but the Tigers had to employ brutal tactics in order to recruit fresh blood, severely undermining the

popular base that Prabhakaran had developed over the previous two and a half decades. By contrast, a freshly invigorated Sri Lanka military under the new leadership of Rajapaksa's kith and kin and reinforced by a significant uplift in numbers and financial support bristled for renewed hostilities. Faced with superior force levels and equipment for the first time in almost three decades, it is unsurprising that the government sought a clean and decisive military victory. Prabhakaran's Tigers were facing inevitable defeat and yet consistently chose confrontation over negotiation, sacrificing wave upon wave of inexperienced recruits in unwinnable tactical encounters. Such observations lend weight to the argument that COIN tactics may only work if the insurgent has a rational end-state that is attainable by some degree of political negotiation.

### **VIII. Successes and Failures of the Campaign**

Much of the evidence suggests that Sri Lanka's campaign was more about direct military intervention rather than COIN. It is thus, now important to examine whether the final coup de grace was necessary and investigate the associated damage caused by ignoring otherwise established COIN theory. Wickramasinghe argued that Rajapaksa sacrificed the long term political fight against Tamil Separatism in order to win an immediate victory over the Tamil Tigers (Wickramasinghe, 2010: 160). It is quite possible that this tactic was a deliberate choice given the intransigence of both the Tiger leadership and the dogmatic nationalist support within the government's own supporters. Any form of

negotiation that would give any credence to the notion of Tamil separatism was seen by the nationalists and in particular by the extremist Buddhist monks as blasphemy. It is therefore unsurprising, that with so much political equity riding on Rajapaksa's promise to solve the LTTE problem, that he would select the most achievable end-state over the most desirable.

The human cost of pursuing the most-achievable path was nonetheless staggering. Unceasing artillery and air attacks took a massive toll, killing and maiming those who neither wanted the war nor took part in it. Swamy argued that the "us and them ideology based on narrow ethnic nationalism failed to adequately recognize that the state could not be a carbon copy of the LTTE, which of course had contempt for civilian lives (Swamy, 2010: 186)." Even after the inevitability of defeat echoed around the battlefield, Prabhakaran characteristically refused to contemplate surrender. Instead he chose to press the ever-decreasing humanitarian space, trapping thousands of innocent Tamil civilians between the devil and the deep blue sea, supposedly in the belief that such suffering might create the "CNN factor" and force the international community to intervene (Weiss, 2012: 101). Such desperate actions were mitigated by a government black out of all media, critically leaving many of the final stages without independent witnesses.

If Rajapaksa defeated the insurgency but then failed to build on this victory, a key phase of recognised COIN doctrine would have regardless been ignored, namely the post-conflict re-construction phase. It would be difficult to regard Sri Lanka's victory as an example of genuine COIN success if such a great price did not yield some measure of

progress. Defeat of the LTTE brought undoubted relief for millions of Sri Lankans but Weiss argues that the Tigers were the one force standing between them and an oppressive state that has institutionalised discrimination and that has spectacularly demonstrated a willingness to use violence against all opposition groups (Weiss, 2012: 10). The grievances that had given rise to the Tamil Tigers did not disappear with their destruction at the Nandikadal Lagoon. While in the aftermath, the government has taken measures to rehabilitate ex-combatants, any legitimacy that may have existed within the Tamil cause is now even less represented politically than when the conflict began.

In Sri Lanka, the ending of three decades of civil war has paved the way, despite international pressure, for an accelerated and illiberal project of state led Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism. Instead of improving the situation, the government has in fact exacerbated the underlying ethnic polarisation meaning that institutional reform cannot occur because of the entrenched and politically robust Sinhala character of the state. It was this crushing realisation that inspired one of the key architects of the victory over the LTTE, General Fonseka to stand against Rajapaksa in the 2010 elections. Fonseka bravely stood on a minority ticket, despite a clear understanding of the tactics that would be employed against him during the campaign. Following the election Fonseka was arrested and incarcerated, immediately after levelling allegations of war crimes against Rajapaksa. Fonseka had also called for a period of political reconciliation in an effort to address lingering grievances, which bore an uncanny resemblance to those that gave rise to the insurgency three decades earlier. The

unanswered anger and bewilderment of the Tamils was eerily similar to the feelings of a previous generation after the 1983 riots, which had resulted in the death of several thousand Tamils.

All of the requisite checks and balances required in a liberal democracy continued to be steadily eroded under Rajapaksa, who remained in office until 2015. The media was effectively beaten into submission and journalists disappeared from news room throughout the capital. For many years the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment forecast a steady realignment of centralised power to the provinces but this was neutered by the crafting of the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment by Rajapaksa. “This constitutional reform removed the president’s term limit, wiped out some of the last vestiges of an independent judiciary, tightened(his) grip on the free press and scuttled independent oversight mechanisms...transforming Sri Lanka from a flawed democracy to a dynastic oligarchy (Weiss, 2012: 253).” A new Buddhist fundamentalism took hold, and as Aruna noted “too many Sri Lankans backed the prosecution of the war at any cost, not realising that it was also being used to cut away the ground from beneath their own feet (Aruna, 2010).”

Sri Lanka’s model for defeating the Tamil Tigers was prodigiously successful and although some of the analysis has been critical of the methods, it is impossible to deny that after three decades of failure, Rajapaksa succeeded where many of his predecessors had failed. It is however, difficult to judge the validity of Sri Lanka’s COIN efforts without providing some degree of context. In the eyes of the liberal west, has the method employed gained irrational primacy over the result? It is relatively easy to put a compelling argument

forward that Sri Lanka is one situation in which the ends might conceivably justify the means. While Sri Lanka arguably has deficiencies in what it deems being its own COIN approach, it is equally so that floundering campaigns elsewhere would benefit from the degree of the decisiveness that Rajapaksa delivered against the LTTE.

Tactical brilliance in COIN translates into very little when political and social context is ignored or misinterpreted. Marston argues that military success may be short lived and bring an end to the immediate dispute seldom addresses the underlying conflict. This observation acknowledges the potential that the Sri Lanka's model did not overlook social and political imperatives but chose to ignore them. It might be more fitting to conclude that Sri Lanka's military was never given the licence to employ a genuine COIN campaign against the Tamil Tigers because the majority Sinhala population and in particular the outspoken nationalist elite would not permit it.

Western COIN doctrine has been shaped by a series of incredibly complex problems, characterised by unintelligible sectarian disputes under the constant scrutiny of the international media. If anything, the common denominator is a severe lack of manoeuvre space in which the commander can develop and execute a strategy. He must also operate at the behest of the international community and under the watchful eye of international law. It is perhaps unsurprising that the concomitant strategy is a comprehensive yet cautious product, characterised by the avoidance of failure rather than a desire to win. For many of the reasons outlined in this paper, Rajapaksa orchestrated an opportunity to operate outside of these traditional restrictions in order to

achieve a decisive military victory. It is unlikely that a western COIN model would have delivered the equivalent military success in the short-term and a follow-up question to this research might be to what extent Rajapaksa failed to build on the military success that he had achieved in the post-conflict period.

## IX. Summary

It is easy and indeed justified to criticise Rajapaksa and his henchmen for the brutality associated with the final stages of the war but it must be remembered that Rajapaksa only became president in 2005. By then, "Prabhakaran was three decades old in ethnic conflagration... and had contributed more than anyone else to widening the ethnic divide in the country(Swamy, 2010: 183)." The balance of evidence and analysis throughout this paper neither condones the methods that Sri Lanka employed to secure military victory nor leaves Rajapaksa to shoulder the responsibility alone. The appalling cost and loss of life over the course of three decades relegated Sri Lanka from rising star to failed state and it is against this demise that the campaign can be interpreted as the final throw of the die by a desperate nation. It is important to set this insurgency against the context of the historical ethnic conflict and understand the unique relationship between the Tamils and Sinhalese since independence. De Silva's observation "that the ruling majority has developed a minority complex; whilst the minority has coveted a yearning for majority status" is apposite(De Silva, 1998: 304).

It is a fair observation that the Sri Lankan

Government did not set-out to follow or develop a COIN model but merely reacted to events at the tactical level. It is also fair that for most of the insurgency, the LTTE did not operate as an insurgent group but more like a conventional adversary complete with land, air and sea components. The post-victory articulation of the “Rajapaksa model” during the 2010 symposium does little to address the criticism that victory came by chance rather than strategy. In the end, there was no unifying political aim that sat above the clearly defined military end-state; the destruction of the Tamil Tigers was the sole purpose of the campaign and, furthermore the campaign was executed with maximum application of force in the achievement of that purpose. This, in itself, should not reflect badly against Fonseka’s military, which delivered a decisive victory but it is the failure to build upon this success that undermines the Sri Lankan case for genuine COIN success.

Decisive victories are few and far between and Rajapaksa’s depended on a “perfect storm” of internal and external factors, which created a fleeting, once in a generation opportunity. The rejection of Western liberal intervention by an emerging group of “coming nations” provided financial and diplomatic support and in particular the huge shadow of Chinese interest represented a powerful move in the “Great Game” being played out in the Indian Ocean with the US. Paradoxically, the latitude invoked by the US led GWOT and the subsequent proscription and strangulation of the LTTE support networks was a significant supporting factor. This was the final moment that the Tigers may have been able to change course and push for political settlement, but for the other crucial factor, the intransigence of

Prabhakaran, which was as decisive as any government action.

Sri Lanka’s defeat of the LTTE is not an example of genuine COIN success because it fails to build on military victory and address the underlying causes of the conflict. After several years of soul searching, the Tamil community is now finding a political voice and contributed to the election of Maithripala Sirisena in 2015. In doing so, it helped to bring about the end of Rajapaksa government that the Tigers had so brutally fought. What this new government will mean for Tamil representation, and thus the true easing of domestic strife between ethnic groups, remains to be seen. It is at this point, that it might be fair to conclude that the “Rajapaksa Model” provided a remedy to Sri Lanka’s three decade insurgency, but not a cure.

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## 대반란작전의 성공요인 분석

– 라자팍사 모델과 타밀 반군의 진압 –

국문초록 2009년 초반 스리랑카 정부군이 타밀 타이거 반군들을 포위 공격하면서 수천명의 민간인이 희생되었다. 타밀 타이거즈와의 내전은 30년 이상 스리랑카에서 계속 되었다. 스리랑카 정부군은 당시의 승리를 ‘라자팍사 모델’ 대반란작전이라고 칭했다. 그러나 서구 사회에서는 ‘라자팍사 모델’에 근본적인 의문을 제기했고, 오히려 호기를 이용한 행운이 작용한 결과로 받아들이는 분위기가 일반적이었다. 본 논문은 스리랑카 정부군의 타밀반군 진압작전을 분쟁의 원인과 진행과정 분석을 통하여 이 작전이 대반란작전의 긍정적인 사례가 될 수 있을 것인가를 고찰하고자 한다. 또한 본 논문은 ‘라자팍사 모델’이 어떻게 세계에서 가장 오랜 분란을 종식시켰는가에 대해 분석하려 한다. 이러한 분석을 통하여 본 논문에서는 ‘라자팍사 모델’이 분란의 근본 원인을 제거하지는 못 했다는 점에서 대반란 작전의 완전한 군사적 승리라기 보다는 문제를 무마한 것에 가깝다는 점을 논증하고자 한다.

주제어 : 대반란작전, 스리랑카, 타밀족, 타밀일람 해방 호랑이, 라자팍사 모델

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