Strategy and adaptation in counterinsurgency: lessons for the Australian Defence Force from the defeat of the Tamil Tigers

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Abstract

How does a small nation defeat an insurgency that has well-armed land, naval and air forces, that possesses a powerful and ruthless ideology, excels at information operations, extensively employs suicide bombing and terror tactics both nationally and internationally, controls a large territory and has strong global financial and moral support? How can a conventional military defeat hybrid warriors by learning and innovating in asymmetric warfare? Sri Lanka defeated the Tamil Tigers after more than 25 years of bitter and brutal conflict, and their experience contains pertinent lessons for Australia. This article explores the effective use of statecraft and diplomacy to execute a clear national and military strategy, and how that strategy was achieved through victory on the battlefield. It then examines the Sri Lankan military’s significant capacity to learn, adapt and innovate in order to undergo a transformation whilst in contact with the enemy. Two case studies consider the Army’s development of combined arms jungle fighting skills and the Navy’s evolution of counter-swarming tactics, and these can be read without studying the background to the war.
Introduction: Using the Military to Achieve a Political Victory

The Sri Lankan defeat of the Tamil Tiger insurgency was due to the effective synchronisation of national strategy to military operations, and the capacity of their military to adapt those operations to the adversary. The Tigers were a sophisticated threat that combined conventional and terror tactics to conduct hybrid warfare in the pursuit of an independent nation for the ethnic Tamil minority of northern Sri Lanka. The generation-long conflict saw periods of intense fighting interspersed with uneasy ceasefires, political agitation, terrorism and international intervention before concluding with the near complete destruction of the Tamil Tigers in mid-2009. The approach of the Sri Lankan government and military to effect a successful conclusion to an apparently intractable conflict provides some important lessons to the Australian Defence Force in an era of long wars and asymmetric warfare.

This article explores the history of the conflict and describes the principal Sri Lankan methods and adaptations that resulted in victory. It is written to improve the Army’s understanding of the conflict and how an insurgency might be defeated by force. After providing historical context it will examine the two most important factors in Sri Lankan success: the harmonisation of diplomatic and military actions to create a coherent national strategy; and the requirement for military forces to learn and innovate to defeat the enemy. This conflict challenged western notions that counterinsurgency operations cannot ‘kill their way to victory’; how the Tamil Tigers were able to be defeated through force will be considered. How non-western states fight, learn and adapt in irregular wars is an under-researched area of study and demonstrates how victory might be achieved in spite of those nations’ comparative resource or technological constraints. Two case studies illustrate adaptations by the Army and Navy to defeat the enemy, and examine tactics, techniques and procedures in greater detail. Finally, the article examines some observations that should be considered by Army readers when examining counterinsurgency campaigns.
Background: The Eelam Wars I to IV

The Tamils are an ethnic minority that comprise the majority population in the north of the island of Sri Lanka (a region they dubbed ‘Eelam’), although a much larger Tamil community is located in adjacent India. Tamil leaders were systematically marginalised by the island’s majority Buddhist Sinhalese community following independence from Britain in 1948, progressively losing their voice and influence in the nation’s affairs. Various armed and political Tamil groups coalesced in the early 1980s into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Tamil Tigers, led by Velupillai Prabhakaran. Charismatic but brutal in enforcing his rule, Prabhakaran led the organisation throughout its existence and maintained the clear goal of independence for Tamil-dominated areas. In 1983, simmering tensions and years of political and armed resistance erupted into a large-scale separatist insurgency between Tamil groups and the Sri Lankan government: the Eelam War I.

International intervention separated the belligerents and forced a negotiated end to the first war in 1988. Neighbouring India deployed a peace enforcement mission which spiralled into the second Eelam war, and the Indians withdrew in 1990 after fighting against both sides and suffering around 1200 soldiers killed. The following year the LTTE demonstrated their reach by assassinating the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, using a female suicide bomber, in retaliation for the intervention. In the 1990s a stalemate and uneasy peace was followed by the Eelam War III which saw the LTTE consolidate their territory and inflict substantial losses on government forces. The Sri Lankans lost a key fortress with more than 1,000 troops killed, and commercial and military jets were spectacularly destroyed in a suicide strike on Colombo’s airport. Exhausted from the fighting, the opponents agreed on a shaky ceasefire that lasted from 2001 through to the start of the fourth and final war in 2006.

The poorly trained and equipped government forces were often outfought in the Eelam wars due to the Tiger’s superior tactics, morale, support networks and innovative use of suicide strikes. The LTTE made extensive use of the diaspora of Tamils (including large communities in India, Canada, Britain and Australia) to obtain political support and funding for their cause. A strong internet presence allowed them to promote their cause internationally, and they used their expertise to mount cyber-attacks on government websites. At the height of their power, the Tigers controlled one-third of the Sri Lankan
coastline and were raising several hundred million US dollars each year from donations and criminal activities including people smuggling and drug trafficking\textsuperscript{10}. Compared to the government they had small but well-developed air, sea and land forces that were employed to strike Sri Lankan government forces and institutions as well as to defend their territory\textsuperscript{11} \textsuperscript{12}. The LTTE became notorious for pioneering the use of suicide bombers for targeted assassinations\textsuperscript{13}, and the widespread use of terror tactics to enforce their rule and demoralise their opponents.

However by 2006 the situation had changed considerably; the LTTE were becoming increasingly isolated and the government was pursuing a new strategy to bring about their defeat. The post-11 September 2001 worldwide security crackdown had seen increasing numbers of nations proscribe the LTTE as a terrorist organisation which dramatically reduced its international moral and financial support\textsuperscript{14}. The 2005 election of President Rajapaksa on a hard-line ‘military first’\textsuperscript{15} counterinsurgency platform saw the size and capacity of Sri Lanka’s military grow significantly. With its plans to end the conflict by force, the Rajapaksa government was shunned by western nations and it sought alternative strategic partnerships, primarily with China\textsuperscript{16}.

In late 2006 the conflict sparked into the fourth and final Eelam war. By this time, the government had articulated a clear strategy with an end state of destroying the LTTE, and was developing the ways and means to achieve it. The Sri Lankan forces embarked on a transformation to use increased weaponry and force size, superior tactics and improved leadership to target the Tiger’s vulnerabilities. The government created political and diplomatic space for the military to operate by isolating the LTTE, securing new international supporters and preventing reporting on the war. The armed forces physically and functionally dislocated the LTTE from support through joint operations, then advanced ground forces deep into former Tiger territories\textsuperscript{17}. By early 2009, the remaining LTTE forces, along with around 100,000 civilians, were surrounded on a small strip of land in the country’s north. Despite increasingly desperate attempts by the international community—particularly Norway—to force a ceasefire, a brief but bloody battle saw the complete destruction of the LTTE leadership and their remaining fighters\textsuperscript{18}.  


While the government triumphantly revelled in victory a number of western countries began calling for investigations into the high civilian casualties, the allegations of war crimes, and the serious human rights abuses by both sides\(^{19,20}\). Former LTTE areas were subject to a military occupation with curfews and movement controls, along with the forced relocation and detention of some 300,000 people. Some have never been released\(^{21}\). The conduct of democratic elections, continuation of peace and the passage of time have seen a gradual rapprochement with the wider international community. Many still question whether the ends justified the means\(^{22}\), but after 26 years of great brutality by both sides it is arguable that a brief but violent resolution was preferable to more of the same. Although Tamil discontent remains, there have thus far been no significant instances of unrest that would indicate the re-emergence of Tamil opposition groups seeking influence outside of the democratic process\(^{23}\). The Sri Lankans can justifiably claim to have destroyed an insurgency by force, achieving their strategic end state through military means.

**Part One: Strategy – a New Approach**

The pursuit of a ‘military first’ strategy in the Eelam War IV required a new approach by the government to give the armed forces the resources, space and time to prosecute the campaign\(^{24}\). It further recognised that attritionist methods of destroying the enemy’s organisation could be decisive. An appraisal of the lines of operation used by the Sri Lankan government demonstrates the use of a whole of nation approach to internal and external diplomacy, isolating the opposition and enabling the military while maintaining political primacy\(^{25}\). This steadily reduced the enemy’s international support and political and military strength before the conduct of a decisive, violent but comparatively brief conventional military campaign. It also granted the military the freedom of action to accept considerable friendly and civilian casualties in prosecuting that campaign without being disrupted by political considerations.

Sri Lanka achieved victory through force by destroying the LTTE’s military and political structures and consequently its capacity and legitimacy. With their definite chain of command and organisation based on a single supreme leader, the Tigers proved susceptible to collapse following defeat on the battlefield or loss of key leaders\(^{26}\). This structure had proved capable
of exerting power and maintaining a unity of purpose that went almost
unchallenged for around 25 years, but proved unable to function in areas not
under direct LTTE control. Kilcullen noted that Sri Lanka’s strategy:

‘recognised that the Tigers were operating in a conventional manner,
were hierarchical and were actively alienating the Tamil population.
Therefore, defeating them conventionally became possible’.

Another author supports this observation by noting that the terminal offensive
was analogous to Sherman’s destructive and decisive ‘march to the sea’
in the American Civil War. Such descriptions explain how the Rajapaksa
government might have concluded that a resolution through force was
possible. That this approach was effective is demonstrated by the absence
of conflict since 2009. By destroying the Tiger’s leadership and capacity to
wage war the Sri Lankans were able to destroy the organization itself.

The use of internal statecraft was instrumental to the progressive
marginalisation of the LTTE and the fragmentation of their influence. The
Rajapaksa government was elected on a platform of ending the conflict
through a hard-line approach in 2005 during an election in which the Tamil
majority areas participated. A violently-enforced LTTE boycott of this poll
both disenfranchised the population it purported to represent and ensured
the election of a government that would come to destroy the Tigers. The
popular mandate provided the government both a justification for and a
determination to maintain their strategy throughout the ensuing expensive
and bloody campaign. It helped that the LTTE had brutally maintained
its rule and assassinated large numbers of Sri Lankans, Tamils included,
that it viewed as a threat. This brutality resulted in the steady fracturing
of its support base and a perceived loss of legitimacy. Sensing this,
the Sri Lankan government pursued a ‘divide and conquer’ approach
and encouraged the defection of several key LTTE leaders who were
subsequently absorbed into the parliament to demonstrate reconciliation.
Later, near the end of the conflict the government’s unity and popular
support allowed it to maintain a strategy of ignoring international pressure
and insisting on an unconditional surrender or destruction.

International diplomacy was also vital to providing the military with freedom
to act. Determined to avoid the interventions that had frustrated previous
campaigns, the Sri Lankan government reduced its reliance on financial and
diplomatic aid from western states and courted nations more sympathetic
to the use of force to crush internal dissent. Past interventions by the international community had been inconclusive, but allowed the Tamils to recover thus preventing a decision being forced\textsuperscript{35}. To enable the military’s primacy the government increased military funding by 40%, made possible by obtaining $US1 billion in loans from China and additional lines of credit from Iran, Russia, Pakistan and Libya\textsuperscript{36}. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China’s support of Sri Lanka ensured that the United Nations would be unlikely to intervene in the conflict. China’s veto prevented the introduction of United Nations resolutions critical of Sri Lanka’s renewed offensive, giving it a free hand in the conduct of its operations despite the protests of human rights groups\textsuperscript{37}. Formal communications channels were established with India to reduce the chances of this powerful neighbour intervening in the conflict for a second time, and there is conjecture that the final assault on the LTTE’s last redoubt in 2009 was delayed until after elections in the adjacent Indian state of Tamil Nadu\textsuperscript{38}.

This deft diplomacy created time for the conduct of unrestricted military operations. Further space was created by silencing critics through rigorously denying humanitarian and media organisations access to the conflict zones, and by harassment and even assassination of domestic critics of the government\textsuperscript{39}. A number of pro-Tamil websites reported frequent ‘denial of service’ attacks during and after the conflict, indicating the possible use of cyber-attacks by the government or its sympathisers\textsuperscript{40}. In any case the government routinely blocked external websites and de-registered Sri Lankan-based sites it deemed to be opposing its policies\textsuperscript{41}. These measures worked and few journalists or humanitarians were able to provide objective reporting in the final months of Eelam War IV\textsuperscript{42}. Consequently, having guarded against the development of coordinated and effective international diplomatic pressure, the Sri Lankan government possessed much greater military freedom of action for the coming conflict. Political primacy thus enabled effective military action.
Part Two: Transforming the Military

The Sri Lankan military’s adaptation during the conflict provides the primary lessons for the Australian Army. Backed by the government’s clear strategy of destroying the LTTE, and provided with the resources necessary to achieve that strategy, the military used lessons from the previous conflicts to improve their effectiveness in great measure. They also significantly increased the size and effectiveness of the Sri Lankan forces, particularly the Army, which increased from 120,000 in 2006 to 200,000 personnel in 2009. Historical British doctrine and force structures were discarded by the Army as it developed more flexible jungle fighting methods that focused specifically on defeating the LTTE’s tactics. The Air Force rapidly developed an integrated air defence system and purchased interdiction aircraft after being surprised by the Tiger’s use of light aircraft in bombing raids; it also employed capable ground attack aircraft in support of land forces throughout the war. The Navy developed innovative swarming tactics to defeat small craft, and employed larger vessels and improved intelligence to target LTTE resupply ships on the open ocean. All three Services cooperated in joint warfare to isolate, contain and then destroy the Tigers in accordance with the government’s strategy. The change to a joint approach likely arose from the experiences of previous conflicts, and the firm direction and coordination provided by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya, a former Army Colonel and the brother of President Rajapaksa. Provided with clear direction at the strategic (and potentially operational) levels, the military could then develop tactical innovations to execute that direction.

How the Sri Lankan military was able to undergo transformation while in contact with the enemy is best explored through the use of specific examples. The following case studies examine the improvement of jungle fighting capacity in the Army, and the development of counter-swarming tactics by the Navy.

Case Study One: Transforming the Army.

This case study examines how improving the fighting capacity, effectiveness and flexibility of tactical units was fundamental to the Sri Lankan Army approach, being achieved through improved leadership, equipment and tactical skill. Early in the conflict the newly-appointed head of the Army,
Lieutenant General Fonseka, handpicked aggressive and innovative battalion and brigade commanders to carry the fight to the enemy. Decision-making was devolved downwards and initiative promoted as a result of Army-wide training. Advanced Infantry Platoon Training involved all ranks in frank analysis and tactical discussion through After Action Reviews, inculcating a sense of creativity in all ranks. These reforms, supported by an influx of new weapons and strong support from the political leadership, greatly improved the morale and fighting capacity of the army.

New tactics emphasised effective intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to locate the enemy, followed by combined arms operations to clear or destroy them. Special forces and reconnaissance patrols were used to locate, isolate and fix insurgents in depth, then clear them through conventional advances and attacks by the regular force. These conventional operations were fundamentally attritionist in nature, focused as they were on the destruction of the enemy and his command structure rather than the capture of ground. General Fonseka later stated: ‘I always gave priority to destroying the terrorists and capturing the ground automatically became a reality.’ The conventional and unconventional forces were interdependent: while the special forces could locate and paralyse the enemy in depth, they were unable to clear them or hold ground without the assistance of the conventional Army. The adoption of these tactics necessitated improved training and junior leadership, and greater trust by the senior leadership in the capacity of their forces to operate in accordance with the commander’s intent. It is difficult to evaluate how widely they were practised but these approaches echo the philosophy of ‘mission command’, as well as the traditional (if perhaps not the contemporary) use of special forces in the Australian Army.

The number and size of infantry units was increased, they were issued improved weapons and night-fighting equipment, and great emphasis was placed upon the ability of the infantry soldier to operate independently in the dense jungle of the Tamil-held areas. Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols operated throughout the LTTE areas and completed both reconnaissance and interdiction tasks. Special Infantry Operations Teams, similar to patrols from an Australian infantry battalion’s reconnaissance platoon, were created and trained to operate several kilometres beyond the Forward Line of Own Troops. A standard infantry company would have up to six of these four- to eight-man patrols, and the training was provided to a wide range of soldiers.
across many units. The patrols provided the infantry battalion to which they were attached improved understanding of the tactical situation while also disrupting LTTE operations in depth. This allowed government forces to maintain the initiative and to concentrate force to destroy the Tigers when they were located in the complex terrain. The screening effect generated also reduced the use of Tiger suicide bombers against concentrations of government troops and convoys.

Direct and indirect fire support was improved with the introduction of new artillery, more effective rocket propelled grenades in increased numbers and the use of Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles to control fires in depth. The Special Infantry Operations Teams were trained to call in artillery, a capability that brought greater firepower under the control of junior commanders who were best placed to target a dispersed or fleeting enemy. Combat engineers were used to breach the extensive fortifications emplaced within Tiger strongholds, and to permit the mobility of armour in support of infantry following the break in.

Combat service support functions were also improved to allow the army to advance further, faster and on more axes from the fixed bases it had traditionally relied upon. The mobility and survivability of both combat and forward logistic units was improved by acquiring more capable vehicles. V-hulled armoured Unibuffel vehicles were fielded in support elements that were integral to the rear area security of the advancing force. Engineers completed extensive mobility tasks to ensure that roads through the jungle-covered terrain remained trafficable in heavy rains during the main advance. Following completion of the battle they were essential to the establishment of shelter, sanitation, power and water services to the occupying forces, and to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons the battle had created. Unusually, General Fonseka claims to have pressed thousands of soldiers who were recovering from wounds into the effort to maintain rear area security, thus freeing up fitter soldiers for the main battle.

The Army adapted whilst in contact with the enemy and was hence able to test concepts, to refine those that worked and discard those that failed, in preparation for the eventual decisive offensive. It was a clear case of the Adaptation Cycle being used in combat. These innovations transformed the capacity of the Sri Lankan Army to close with and defeat the Tamil Tiger.
forces in close combat and underpinned the campaign’s success. Writing in The Diplomat, Layton noted:

‘With enhanced training in complex jungle fighting operations, Sri Lankan soldiers generally became more capable, more professional, and more confident. The Army could now undertake increasingly difficult tasks day or night while maintaining a high tempo. The Army had become a ‘learning organization’ that embraced tactical level initiatives and innovations’. The above improvements allowed the Army to generate increased numbers of more effective units. Army utility in previous conflicts had been limited by the small number of combat-capable soldiers and limited logistics; most forces were unable to operate far from their protective bases and fortresses. Consequently, narrow frontage advances along jungle roads were required and these were easily stymied by mines, improvised explosive devices, ambushes and artillery strikes. These tactics were costly, slow and ineffective. Fonseka noted that to defeat the Tigers ‘we realised we had to advance in very wide fronts...in order to disperse the terrorist manpower and firepower’. By 2009 the Army’s improvements would permit the conduct of a corps-level continuous advance by five divisions across a frontage comprising the whole Sri Lankan island. That offensive would lead to the final battle of the war and was a clear demonstration of the progress achieved.

Case Study Two: Defeating the LTTE at Sea

This case study examines the Tamil Tigers’ successful use of basic swarming tactics, and the subsequent adaptation by the Sri Lankan Navy to defeat this threat through counter-swarming. The use of swarming tactics to isolate, overwhelm and destroy an otherwise more capable adversary has become increasingly common in recent conflicts. Such tactics are proving popular with the new generations of ‘hybrid-warrior’ groups practising hybrid warfare (such as Hezbollah and Daesh) as they seek to negate the technological and firepower advantages of their better-equipped adversaries. The Iranian Navy makes heavy use of such techniques for potential anti-access/area denial operations in the Straits of Hormuz, and the ADF might well encounter such threats when pursuing its maritime strategy.
Swarm tactics are designed to overwhelm the capacity of a target to respond effectively by simultaneously presenting multiple threats\textsuperscript{74}. Such tactics allow otherwise vulnerable or unsophisticated weapons systems to defeat much more capable targets by exceeding the capacity of weapons and command and control systems, or denying the ability to outmanoeuvre a threat. Disruptive technology weapons like small, inexpensive uninhabited or autonomous air, land and sea vehicles\textsuperscript{75} are being widely examined for their ability to saturate targets\textsuperscript{76}. An unsurprising defensive trend is emerging in response: interdict the swarm as far out as possible using multiple defensive platforms with superior command and control and firepower. However, this can be difficult to achieve when detection ranges are short or the defender does not possess technical superiority, leading to proposals for counter-swarming\textsuperscript{77}.

Lacking a sanctuary on land, the LTTE's materiel resupply depended on a fleet of armed speedboats that would dash backwards and forwards from ‘warehouse ships’ to collect everything from rifles to aircraft (effectively sea-basing, a concept Australia is pursuing). The Navy responded by attempting to establish a blockade with small Fast Attack Craft and Offshore Patrol Vessels.

To counter the blockade the LTTE's maritime arm, the Sea Tigers, used swarm tactics that involved five to fifteen armed speedboats closing simultaneously on a target vessel. Most of the boats would seek to suppress the Sri Lankan vessel’s defences with machine guns and automatic grenade launchers while preventing its escape. Concealed among and protected by the other vessels, an explosive-laden suicide boat would then attempt to ram the target and detonate its payload. Initially these tactics were highly successful and were often filmed for their strategic messaging. Despite being more capable, the Sri Lankan vessels lacked sufficient weapons and speed to interdict the LTTE boats and proved to be highly vulnerable to isolation and destruction by the swarm\textsuperscript{78}.

As with the Japanese kamikaze tactics of the Second World War, early interdiction was to prove more successful than point defence\textsuperscript{79}. Rather than purchase larger and more capable craft the Sri Lankans copied captured LTTE speedboats and produced them in large quantities, seeking superior numbers rather than superior capabilities. This ‘Small Boat Concept\textsuperscript{80,81}’ was supported by establishing land- and sea-based tracking radars to allow early
detection and more effective coordination of the blockade. Smaller craft patrolled close to shore with the larger and more capable vessels layered in depth, each layer coordinating the actions of the next layer landwards. LTTE speedboat sorties were detected and intercepted close to shore by large numbers of small craft in formation, preventing the Sea Tigers from massing against their preferred target. The LTTE boats were instead swarmed by large numbers of nearly identical Navy craft, and once isolated were destroyed in detail without a chance to employ their suicide craft. LTTE engagements dropped from 21 in 2006 to 11 in 2007, then to only four in 2008. The Sea Tigers had been comprehensively defeated—the naval blockade was crucial to the subsequent destruction of the LTTE on land.

While a maritime action, the use of early interdiction and counter-swarming tactics by the Sri Lankan Navy also has lessons that can be applied in the land domain. On land, the battlespace makes for short detection ranges, and the differences in capability between opposing weapons systems are often minor. Therefore the principles of superior early warning, command and control, using commensurate firepower, mobility and protection, and defence in depth apply. By learning from failure the Sri Lankans leveraged their superior manpower, training and command to develop tactics that adapted to the threat and defeated it.

Part Three: Using Strategy to Enable Effective Tactics

The destruction of the LTTE could only be achieved through the conduct of a set-piece land battle to eliminate their military strength and leadership. While the Eelam War IV lasted from 2006 to 2009, the decisive manoeuvre only occurred in the final seven months of the conflict. The 2006 through 2008 period was largely consumed with shaping operations as the Sri Lankan Navy established a maritime blockade around the Tamil-held territory, the security and intelligence forces prevented Tiger suicide strikes in government-held areas, and the Army gained control of the eastern provinces while disrupting the Tigers in depth. The combination of diplomacy, information operations and targeted assassinations of LTTE leaders had increasingly fractured their leadership and capacity to secure their territory. This provided the time required for the transformation of the Army into a force capable of conducting extended and complex offensive
operations. By the time the main ground offensive commenced in late 2008 the LTTE lacked the broad support of its population and was relying heavily on conscription and coercion to stay in power. This offensive was the culmination of the ‘military first’ strategy.

The decisive ground manoeuvre saw five infantry divisions simultaneously advance north, east and south along four axes across the breadth of the island, dispersing the Tiger forces and firepower and denying them the ability to regroup. Previous narrow advances along the corridors of single jungle roads had proved vulnerable to interdiction and were abandoned in favour of advancing across a broad frontage. Unlike the previous Eelam wars, the improvements to the government forces allowed them to maintain the momentum of the advance until the Tigers were concentrated in a final defensive bastion. The LTTE responded by forcibly utilising civilians as human shields, digging-in and desperately appealing to the international community for a negotiated settlement. The final battle was one of close and ruthless combat as the government forces fought through tens of thousands of non-combatants concentrated on a narrow coastal sandbar at Nandi Kadal. After bloody fighting with significant civilian casualties the Sri Lankan Army overran the LTTE bastion, eliminated the final resistance and exhibited the body of LTTE leader Prabhakaran. An end to hostilities was declared on 18 May 2009.

**Conclusion**

The Sri Lankan government triumphed by deciding to destroy the LTTE, developing a strategy that focused the whole of the nation on that objective, and transforming their military to execute that strategy. The LTTE proved incapable of adapting to the new situation and clung to their previously successful tactics, even as they failed to stop the government forces. While improvements in technology and growth in force size were essential to the destruction of the Tigers, the increased ability of the government forces to learn and adapt was the fundamental difference between the victory of Eelam War IV and the stalemate achieved in the previous three conflicts. The development of specific capabilities and tactics, and the effective execution of operational plans to employ them was a direct result of the deliberate examination of previous failings.
Many militaries have disregarded the Sri Lankan approach due to the high casualties to both sides and to non-combatants, but this perhaps ignores the inherently violent nature of war. Western counter-insurgency doctrine notes the need for an appropriate level of force in subduing opponents, particularly when fighting against an enemy as adept at practising terrorism as the LTTE. Distaste for the non-combatant casualties caused by the Sri Lankan methods does not alter the fact they were effective, and there are parallels to other wars such as the Russo-Chechen conflict. It is possible that control of the media, a disregard for human rights and using ruthless tactics with an acceptance of significant civilian casualties is the price of victory in such insurgencies. This article has not sought to examine the ethics of the conflict. That is not to excuse the conduct of either side—United Nations investigations identified egregious human rights violations by both parties—but neither does it automatically invalidate the lessons observed.

There are also implications for the limits of western influence in a world where developing nations can find increasing support from non-Anglo-European sources.

The lessons for the ADF lie primarily in the fitting of military operations to the national strategy, and in the capacity for learning and adaptation demonstrated by the Sri Lankan military. The Sri Lankan forces examined their enemy, developed tactics to target critical vulnerabilities, and then trained, structured and equipped themselves to execute those tactics. This occurred not just through clear command direction, leadership and resources, but also by tolerating tactical failures early in the conflict. The essential pre-conditions for this force transformation were the commitment of the political leadership to a ‘military first’ strategy, and then orchestration of diplomatic and political actions to provide the military the means and the freedom of action to execute it.

The Sri Lankan experience provides salient lessons for developing professional militaries that can execute innovative techniques within a clear strategy to achieve victory. The Australian Army aspires to be innovative. It must therefore have a deep understanding of the nature of the likely battle, a culture of effective and reflective leadership and a tolerance for failure to meet those aspirations.
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Endnotes


14. Ibid.

15. The term ‘military first’ is the author’s, it is derived from a number of statements made by President Rajapaksa and other key leaders, eg ‘given the political will, the military can crush terrorism’ by Sunimal Fernando, presidential advisor, quoted in the Indian Defence Review. http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/lessons-from-the-war-in-sri-lanka/ See also ‘Rajapaksa clearly conveyed to General Sarath Fonseka: ‘eliminate the LTTE.’ To the outside world he conveyed the same message differently: ‘either the LTTE surrenders or face, their end.’ in the same article.


18. For a comprehensive, thought provoking and harrowing account of the conflict, and in particular the events of 2009 and civilian casualties, see Weiss, G, *The Cage: The fight for Sri Lanka and the last days of the Tamil Tigers*, The Bodley Head, UK, 19 May 2011.


20. *Report of the Secretary General’s panel of experts on accountability in*


24. In the immediate aftermath of their victory senior Sri Lankan leaders appear to have been affected by hubris when ascribing their success to the brilliance of their armed forces. While acknowledging that their strategy was largely evolutionary rather than planned, the reasons provided for defeating the LTTE were often self-congratulatory and in hindsight some may be inaccurate. President Rajapaksa and his key leaders attributed their success to the ‘Rajapaksa method’ of counter-insurgency, based on the following eight tenets:

1. Political will
2. Go to hell (that is, ignore domestic and international criticism)
3. No negotiations
4. Regulate media
5. No ceasefire
6. Complete operational freedom
7. Accent on young commanders
8. Keep your neighbours in the loop


26. Kilcullen noted that ‘a counter-insurgency strategy is literally any
Combination of actions to counter an insurgency”, therefore the use of conventional tactics does not mean the conflict cannot be examined through a counter-insurgency lens. For more see Kilcullen, D., speech 01 Jun 2011.


28. Marks, J. T., Assessment of the end game—Analysis, Eurasia Review, 03 June 2016, p5


32. Ibid, p16.


35. A fact which supports the thesis of Luttwak, E., Time to give war a chance, Foreign Affairs; Jul/Aug 1999; Vol 78, 4; p3.


42. Weiss, The Cage: The fight for Sri Lanka and the last days of the Tamil Tigers, 2011.

43. Layton, How Sri Lanka Won the War: Lessons in strategy from an
overlooked victory, 2015.

44. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the Sri Lankan Army may have used the Brigg’s Plan from British Counter-insurgency efforts in Malaya as the inspiration of their original counter-insurgency philosophy. Such an approach would have likely failed in the face of the entirely different nature of the LTTE from the dispersed communist threat in Malaya. The reforms of Eelam War IV can be seen as a deliberate repudiation of the British techniques. Some background is provided by Nugera, R, Brigadier, Innovations in Training, article in Business Today (Sri Lanka) newspaper, July 2011, http://www.businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=3487 and also in the Background description of the 2011 Colombo Defence Seminar: Defeating Terrorism Sri Lankan Experience (sic), http://www.defseminar.lk/about-us/2011Seminar.php accessed 13 Jul 16.


47. Including one vessel that was sunk just outside the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone off the Cocos Islands. Fish, T. ‘Sri Lanka learns to counter Sea Tigers’ swarm tactics’, Janes Navy International, March 2009, p20–25.

48. Marks, Assessment of the end game, 2016, p5.


51. Shashikumar, VK, Lessons from Sri Lanka’s War, Indian Defence
52. Ibid.
57. Author’s conversation with Sri Lankan Army officers, 20 Mar 2015.
58. Ibid.
63. Author’s conversation with Sri Lankan Army officers, 20 Mar 2015.
66. Ibid.


86. There were inevitably ebbs and flows in the battle – at one point a Tiger counter attack drove an ‘astonished’ division back four miles: Weiss, The Cage: The fight for Sri Lanka and the last days of the Tamil Tigers, 2011.


92. Luttwak, E., Time to give war a chance, Foreign Affairs; Jul/Aug 1999; Vol 78, 4; p3.


94. The author Gordon Weiss (author of The Cage, referenced herein) stated ‘the cause was just, but were the methods used by the state just, and beyond the victory did the state reveals itself as the just victor?’ in a lecture at the Australian National University, 03 Aug 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uzRNl8NByo.

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