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When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers, by Ahmed S. Hashim

Sameer Lalwani^a

^a Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge,
USA

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and presidential candidate Ronald Reagan would have found dubious, as would many other scholars today, including this reviewer.

Yet whether one agrees or disagrees with some of his particular interpretations, such should not detract from what is in the aggregate a singularly impressive body of work. This book can be read with profit by both seasoned fans of Trachtenberg and those needing a first introduction to his work. And it offers a useful starting point to bring political scientists and historians back into regular conversation with each other and perhaps even collaboration.

WILLIAM INBODEN © 2014

University of Texas-Austin, USA

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Ahmed S. Hashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp.265. \$59.95, HB. ISBN 978-0-8122-4452-6.

For those seeking to understand how the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – the 'A-team of terrorist groups' – was dealt a catastrophic death, Ahmed S. Hashim's work provides an excellent starting point. After decades as one of the world's most feared and sophisticated insurgent organizations, the LTTE's rapid demise garnered interest from all directions. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has even proffered its final military campaign as a model for others to emulate. Most recent accounts of the conflict concentrate on the civilians caught in the middle, but few besides Hashim have written a concise military analysis of the conflict. The book is informed by a wide range of secondary materials and an impressive level of interview access including special forces operators, military and intelligence chiefs, and the GoSL Defence Secretary.

The author situates the 27-year civil war within Sri Lanka's ethno-linguistic, religious, and caste cleavages, as well as its colonial legacy. While there have been other bouts of political violence throughout its post-colonial history, the longest and bloodiest was the insurgency by the Tamil minority, which suffered a status reversal to the Sinhala

majority soon after the British departure. As the Tamils' position diminished, political mobilizations eventually turned violent and erupted in civil war in 1983. The LTTE would eventually consolidate control over the separatist movement and demand an independent homeland in the northern and eastern regions, constituting 28 per cent of Sri Lankan territory (p. 46).

Hashim provides an understanding of the operational history of an important but understudied recent campaign. While he summarizes the first three rounds of this conflict and a lengthy ceasefire agreement (2002–05), his comprehensive analysis of Eelam War IV (2006–09) is the major empirical contribution. It details ground operations following defections in the Eastern theater, the multiple axes of ground advance in the Northern theater that choked LTTE strongholds, the Air Force's development of close air support capabilities, and the Navy's successful targeting of LTTE's 'floating arms warehouses' to deny resupply of armaments (p. 174). The value of this military analysis is undeniable. In an age where draws are routine in counterinsurgency campaigns, the author rightly points out that 'the magnitude and decisiveness of the victory is compelling reason enough to study this case' (p. 2). The fact that the war was fought by a small, resource-limited, non-Western incumbent facing 'one of the deadliest' and 'most professional ... insurgent groups in the world' makes it all the more important to understand the military keys to victory (p. 132). The government won by a campaign of 'attrition' (p. 194). Western militaries have built a counterinsurgency template based on case studies of post-colonial wars – particularly Malaya, Algeria, and Vietnam – but Hashim describes how the GoSL achieved victory with a heavily kinetic, 'enemy-centric' approach orthogonal to Western doctrine (pp. 42, 44). It relied on superior firepower (p. 8), offensives on multiple fronts (pp. 103, 132), and even state-assisted settlers (pp. 133, 157).

According to Hashim, however, this approach may not make it easy for Sri Lanka to return to normal politics. As he puts it, 'what states do with their victories ... is as important, if not more so, as how they achieved victory on the battlefield' (p. 15). Counterinsurgency is often described as a form of competitive state-building with simultaneous political and military objectives, but the final GoSL campaign never offered a new political order. Still, Hashim's conclusions seem more normative than analytical. Despite little redress of political grievances and lingering separatist sentiment, the Tamil nationalist opposition is weak and divided; conflict has not resumed after almost five years, suggesting the victory may be durable. Nonetheless, Hashim's analysis of the post-conflict environment reveals how victory introduces new challenges. The landscape of Sri Lankan governance has been fundamentally reshaped by a new 'national security state' (p. 48). After

considerable military expansion secured battlefield victory, political tensions soon emerged between civilian and military leaders (pp. 201–2). The military’s rapid and massive expansion has enabled or required it to ‘spread its tentacles into every aspect of society, including government administration, diplomatic corps, politics, reconstruction, and the economy’ (p. 203). Western leaders grapple with whether their militaries have stayed long enough in foreign campaigns to preserve hard-fought gains, but domestic incumbents may confront a different problem of their militaries staying too long after victory.

The book is admirably detailed, but Hashim’s conclusions on the cause of victory are in tension with much of his empirical work. He acknowledges the project is more an empirical study of the conflict, ‘why it occurred, how it evolved, and why it ended the way it did’ (p. 17), but he situates his work within theoretical literature on counterinsurgency strategy, citing Galula, Kitson, Kilcullen, and US Field Manual 3-24, and emphasizing the GoSL’s ‘revitalized COIN doctrine’ (p. 34). To explain the counterinsurgency success, he identifies a range of factors but ultimately hangs his hat on two: ‘learning and adaptation by the Sri Lankan military’ and ‘problems within the [LTTE]’ (p. 33). In the perennial debate over what explains military outcomes, Hashim aligns with the role of strategy. This judgment seems incongruent with much of his evidence, which suggests the Sri Lankan military simply overwhelmed the LTTE.

Throughout Hashim’s account of Eelam IV, the shifting balance of power and the GoSL’s material preponderance seem to play a more prominent role than strategic choices. Undoubtedly, the military developed new conventional tactics, but this seems less critical if victory was achieved by ‘the same military that had fought the LTTE in the last 30 years’ and if ‘one of the most – if not the most – important changes was to massively increase the size of the armed forces’ (p. 187). This dramatic shift in military force levels, rather than force employment, better explains the different outcome. After the Army tripled to 300,000 troops and total manpower increased from 125,000 to 450,000 troops, it was no surprise the military was now able to ‘fix’ LTTE units, advance from multiple directions, and hold recaptured territory all at once – capabilities they lacked in previous campaigns (p. 188). As in the past, the state chose an attrition strategy in Eelam IV, but this time the GoSL’s material dominance rendered it much more potent.

Moreover, the LTTE’s supposed missteps had been sources of success for 23 years. Alleged ‘blunders’ like high-profile assassinations, civilian victimization, and conventional tactics drew some international ire but also enabled the LTTE to outbid rivals, attract funding and recruitment, control their cadres and Tamil civilians, and secure a semi-autonomous territory (pp. 35, 122–3, 191). Hashim faults the organization for its underdeveloped political wing, but many studies have documented that

the LTTE's extensive state-building enterprise included taxation, policing, and service provision (pp. 35, 193). Though perhaps insufficient for insurgent victory, all these strategies made the LTTE militarily and politically formidable. If the strategic choices of both sides remained largely constant throughout the campaigns, a better explanation for the change in outcome may be the sudden and substantial expansion of state forces that enabled the GoSL to effectively wipe out the LTTE.

Intensifying this material imbalance were a number of exogenous factors that favored the GoSL. This included: the unanticipated 2004 defection of LTTE commander Colonel Karuna, who took a quarter of its forces with him and fed the GoSL valuable intelligence (pp. 119–22); the December 2004 tsunami that wiped out thousands of LTTE ground and naval forces (pp. 122, 172); and the outpouring of military, economic, and intelligence support to the GoSL from rival states jockeying for position in the Indian Ocean, including China, India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Israel, and even the United States (pp. 175–8, 183–4). These shocks deserve greater prominence as they dramatically altered the balance of power before Eelam IV began.

The under emphasis of material preponderance aside, Hashim has done a great service with this rich empirical synthesis that details both tactical developments as well as the tectonic shifts in power across all phases of this conflict. The case study is a major contribution to the civil conflict literature as it challenges many foundations of Western counterinsurgency doctrine. It deserves to be read by scholars and practitioners if only for the fact that decisive counterinsurgency victories, like Sri Lanka's, are increasingly rare.

SAMEER LALWANI © 2014

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA

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Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp.335. £55, HB. ISBN 9781-10704-785-3.

Suddenly, strategy, the lost art, is a centre of attention. Lawrence Freedman produces a major and much reviewed work, *Strategy: A History* (2013),¹ and now another academic knight follows. Considering the two tells you much about the subject today, its strengths, and its limitations. First, it is readily apparent that strategy attracts both the energy of skilled, fluent and important scholars and

¹Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (2013).