

**When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers** by Ahmed S. Hashim, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2014, pp. 265, INR 850

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-led insurgency in Sri Lanka was amongst the fiercest and most bloody low-intensity conflicts fought during the last two decades of the 20th century and first decade of the 21st century. This ethnic conflict became known for not only the fighting prowess and ruthlessness of the LTTE, but also the equally brutal manner in which it was finally ended by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). This raised questions from sympathizers of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, based on firsthand experience and severe indictment by a United Nations (UN)-led panel, which investigated the last phase of the operations. It also brought into focus the argument of the Sri Lankan Government, questioning the independence and intent of the panel. They further rued the fact that the elimination of one of the most ruthless terrorist organizations had not been acknowledged and appreciated by the international community.

Ahmed S. Hashim in his book chronicles the course of events, commencing from the roots of the conflict till its bloody termination, with a unilateral declaration of victory by the SLA. As part of this assessment, the book covers the analysis over five chapters, in a bid to connect the causative factors with the events. Contextualizing the conflict, the author attributes it to the diminishing role of Tamils in society, as well as reducing opportunities for them. Describing the forms of warfare, he rightly concludes that they spanned a large part of the

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spectrum of conflict—including elements of terrorism, insurgency as well as conventional warfare.

The reliance and shift of the LTTE to conventional means was one of the factors for its defeat, given the clear superiority SLA had developed over a period of time and the constraints placed on the resources of LTTE near simultaneously. The author attempts to decode the Sri Lankan model of fighting an insurgency and quotes an SLA officer, who described it as 'kill, hold, build' (p. 42). He emphasizes that the focus of SLA remained on the elimination of as many LTTE cadres as was possible in every contact, rather than on alienating them from the population, which is the commonly understood centre of gravity for winning an insurgency. This emphasis on a kinetic approach was tempered with India's concerns, which were sympathetic to the Tamil population.

Commenting on the post-conflict scenario, the author emphasizes the need for reconciliation to ensure that minorities are brought back into the mainstream. It is also important to ensure that the repressive nature of emergency measures undertaken is replaced by normalization of conditions that strengthen the democratic process of the state.

The chapter 'Eelam War I-III Campaigns' provides an overview of events commencing with the ambush of an SLA patrol and the anti-Tamil riots thereafter. The narrative is based on the author's interactions and interviews as well as documented history of the events. This provides a useful backdrop; however, at times, the effort is marred by strong personal opinions on personalities and organizations, which seem to indicate biases, especially when these are not supported by evidence. The author calls the former Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, J.N. Dixit, 'supremely arrogant' with a 'bullying role' (p. 94). It is entirely possible that some of the Sri Lankan leaders may have shared this perception and, therefore, their quotes would have better substantiated this opinion. Similarly, the author describes the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from the country in a manner, again without evidence, that is more similar to a columnist's style rather than a serious chronicle of events. He writes: 'The IPKF withdrew in fury after heavy losses, but not before roughing up, killing, looting, and raping the Tamils who came within reach' (p. 98). He not only makes such statements about past events, but also future. 'Israel has been able to produce more military effectiveness than its Arab opponents—whose trials and tribulations in creating military effectiveness have been extensively studied—yet despite victory after victory, will never be able to conclusively defeat them' (p.

180). This predictive assessment of the future comes across more as a personal conviction rather than something based on empirical evidence.

The description of the Eelam Wars I–III is more of a narrative, with emphasis only on important events and personalities during the period. Much of this is well known and does not add to the literature on the subject. However, in contrast, the Eelam War IV has been given the requisite emphasis and, purely from the perspective of a military narrative, it has added value to the book. However, it would have been far more useful for a reader who is unfamiliar with the geography of the area if the narrative could be supported with maps and illustrations to highlight key operational manoeuvres and successive advancements of the SLA. It would have also facilitated co-relation to the geography of the area, which was one of the factors in the nature of operations undertaken. This is especially valuable since the area provides considerable variation from the operations recently witnessed in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The author attributes LTTE's defeat to a number of factors, including Prabhakaran's centralized leadership and his lack of strategic understanding, weakness of the political wing of LTTE, inability to adapt to changing conditions, assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, refusal to accept an autonomous status, and changing international outlook after 9/11, amongst others (pp. 189–96). He attributes the success of the SLA to their being 'better trained and more motivated'. This is difficult to assess in the absence of a more systematic analysis of cadres on both sides. He also attributes it to the inability of the LTTE to fight effective hybrid warfare (p. 195). However, it seems more likely that the LTTE played to the strength of the SLA by overly relying on conventional wars, rather than neutralizing their superiority in terms of numbers, weapons and equipments, by shifting back to guerrilla warfare alone till the attrition of time and casualties could regain the balance for the LTTE.

The author's assessment of the Sri Lankan Government's premature celebration of victory and their lack of focus in addressing the alienated Tamils captures the essence of the mood of the people (p. 197). However, both the title of the book and the author's assessment that it was a defeat of the insurgency, are flawed (p. 198). Since insurgencies are essentially guided by some political motive, the inability of the Sri Lankan Government to redress genuine grievances has allowed the cause to remain embedded in the consciousness of the Tamils. Therefore, this period could well become a pause between different phases of a larger movement, of which the LTTE was one part. This is reinforced by the author himself,

since such conflicts are known to have resurfaced over a period of time, unless legitimate demands are met (p. 199). The assessment of the state's authoritarian streak is accurate, which holds within its flawed structure the seeds of the country being controlled by an absolute power centre that refuses to honour the spirit of democracy.

This book, and especially the chapter on Eelam IV, contributes to the existing literature on the conflict in Sri Lanka. It is readable and provides a good overview of events over three decades, along with a useful historical backdrop.