



Review Essay

Manekshaw Paper 22 A

Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict:
How Eelam War IV was Won

Ashok Mehta

[Manekshaw Paper 22]

Reviewed by Dr SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

Editorial Team

Editor-in-Chief : Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd)
Managing Editor : Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch (Retd)
Deputy Editor : Samarjit Ghosh

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with contemporary issues of national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflicts and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Centre for Land Warfare Studies
RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt
New Delhi 110010

© 2010 Centre for Land Warfare Studies

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without first obtaining written permission of the copyright owner.

The views expressed are the personal views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of CLAWS.

About the author

Dr SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda has worked extensively in international affairs, history and the history of art. He has written numerous articles on the early colonial period and is the author of several major works on the art and heritage of Sri Lanka. He was Visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he taught on the 'Evolution of Art and Architecture in Sri Lanka'. He has also been a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka. As a keen observer of military matters, he is one of the few non-combatants to have been present in the war zone during the final stages of the Eelam War IV. He has given lectures at the Sir John Kotalawala Defence Academy, Sri Lanka and the United Services Institution of India, New Delhi. He is the author of *Sri Lanka: The Last Phase in Eelam War IV- From Chundikulam to Pudumattalan* [Manekshaw Paper No. 13, 2009]

Introduction

Major General Ashok Mehta's paper is the first complete account to be published on Sri Lanka's last Eelam War. General Mehta provides a comprehensive overview of Eelam War IV, detailing the history of events from the outbreak of the conflict right up to its conclusion. His overview looks at the military and political factors involved and succeeds in being both narrative and analytical

One of the most valuable aspects of this paper lies in the author's ability to bring together a wide range of information on different aspects and areas of the conflict. Using Sri Lankan and international sources, General Mehta has done his best to scrutinise everything within his reach, drawing on newspapers, magazine articles, media sources, personal interviews, conversations and field accounts. Despite the vast array of material which has emerged, General Mehta works his way through the different stages of the conflict step by step. His approach is ordered and methodical, and above all, it is extremely lucid. This is what makes his paper such a useful and informative introduction to the subject.

Given his vast experience and eminence in his field, it is disappointing that General Mehta has to rely so heavily on secondary evidence. At times, this serves to restrict his very considerable powers of analysis. How the rest of the world sees the Eelam War is well known and well documented. How Sri Lankans saw the conflict and how they fought it less known. What happened? What changed and how was it done? This is the story which General Mehta and other authorities should seek to understand and try to tell.¹

The first part of Mehta's paper goes to some length to set the scene, outlining the political circumstances which led to the outbreak of hostilities. In tracing the history of these events, Mehta very rightly points out that it was the LTTE who closed the door to negotiations.² The LTTE's attempts to assassinate the Army Commander and the Defence Secretary had a profound impact on the military and political leadership. Although he acknowledges that they helped precipitate the reorganisation of the army,³ General Mehta does not probe any further. In reality, there were crucial moments and their impact fundamental and formative.

The LTTE were well aware of the threat posed by General Sarath Fonseka. In their eyes, he was one of the few men left capable of destroying their organisation. In the short time since he became Army Commander, General Fonseka had already embarked on a far-reaching reorganisation of the army. However, due to the political situation at the time, he found himself working under tremendous constraints.

The LTTE suicide attack left Fonseka badly injured and he was lucky to escape with his life. This had a profound effect on the Army Commander, who was well known in army circles for his tenacious and unrelenting nature. Whereas previous commanders may have backed down, with Fonseka, the attempt to kill him merely hardened his determination, setting his resolve in stone. "They tried to kill me once. They will not get a second chance."⁴ In trying to kill Fonseka, the LTTE had created a driving, implacable enemy. This was the source of his motivation and unremitting personal commitment.

The attempt on General Fonseka also helped change attitudes within the establishment. The leadership realised that without Fonseka, they could not hope to fight (and defeat) the Tigers. The restraints which had held Fonseka back were lifted. He was allowed a free hand and given the resources he needed.

The attempt on the life of the Defence Secretary in December 2006 was another crucial moment. One of the most telling images of the conflict is the sight of President Mahinda Rajapakse embracing his brother after he had just escaped with his life. Captured on national television, the President's face as he embraces his brother, makes an interesting study. Apart from the immense joy and relief, there is apprehension and sober realisation.

Sri Lanka's political leadership had been renowned for its lack of commitment and its tendency to back down in the face of military reverses and international pressure. This had been one of the prevailing characteristics of the whole conflict. To many within the military, President Mahinda Rajapakse was no different. In Mehta's own words, "puncturing the myth of the LTTE's invincibility was an idea which even Mahinda Rajapakse did not believe possible."⁵

General Mehta writes that in “November 2005, soon after he became president, he cranked up the war machinery.”⁶ A populist and a shrewd tactician, a brief glance at Mahinda Rajapakse’s political career does not reveal a man with a set agenda or a particular cause. Very much a man of the moment, in many peoples’ eyes, he was the quintessential dealmaker. To see him as he has been portrayed, as a hard-line Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, irretrievably committed to war, is far from the truth. The assassination attempt on his brother however, brought home the hard truth. It convinced the President and those nearest to him that they would never be safe while the LTTE remained in being. It convinced them that this was a struggle which had to be fought to the finish; only then could a lasting peace be achieved. This realisation was what added steel to the political will, generating a resolution and a tenacity which no Sri Lankan government had ever shown before.

In 1987, the government of JR Jayawawardene had given way in the face of Indian pressure. It called off the Vadamarachchi offensive when it was on the verge of success, signed the Indo-Lanka Accord and accepted the reality of Indian intervention in Sri Lanka. The previous administration of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunge proved no different. After a series of military reverses and an attempt on her life in 1999, a visibly shaken Kumaranatunge lost her nerve. Calling off the war, she did everything she could to prevent a resumption of hostilities, remaining inactive even when her Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, was murdered in 2005.

The history of the Eelam War shows that the LTTE had consistently relied on assassinations to break the morale of the Sri Lankan government and undermine its willingness and ability to fight.⁷ This had been a tried and tested method and it had always worked before.⁸ What is extraordinary is that it did not work this time.

Instead, the very opposite of what the LTTE had intended occurred. It brought the military and the political leadership together and gave them a vested interest in fighting the war. Unlike previous regimes, this administration did not lose its nerve and back down. The Rajapakse government was not overwhelmed by the grim reality of what had been up till now an unwinnable war. Instead of being cowed, they embraced this reality and set about changing it – to make an unwinnable war winnable. It was a remarkable political

transformation. Almost every commentator talks of political will as being a key factor in the final resolution of the last Eelam War. This was its secret.

The real clues to the outbreak of Eelam War IV lie in the thinking of Prabhakaran and the Tamil Tiger hierarchy. Why did the LTTE obstruct negotiations? Why did it refuse to compromise and why did it drive the Sri Lanka government to the point of war? These are some of the questions which come to mind.

The answer is simple. The LTTE went to war because it thought it could win. This was the other reality behind the conflict. The international community and the international media had trumpeted it around the world that the Tamil Tigers were invincible. General Mehta is absolutely right when he tells us that Prabhakaran and the LTTE misread Mahinda Rajapakse and that they underestimated the Sri Lankan army.⁹ As a result, the Tigers believed that this administration would set out to do what all Sri Lankan governments had tried to do in the past - to weaken the LTTE and force them to talk.¹⁰

The Tigers themselves believed that the Sri Lankan government could not win and that the Sri Lanka army could not fight. It was what they told the civilians who followed them. In the words of an old woman fleeing the great camp at Pudumattalan, this was something which they had all believed.

They promised us Freedom. Freedom from the Sinhalese. They said that the Sinhalese army would never come here. They said that they were frightened and stupid. They will only come on the road. Where is our freedom now?¹¹

Judging from past history, the Tigers felt sure that even if the Sri Lankan government did go to war, it could not sustain the cost of a prolonged conflict. The Tigers believed the Rajapakse administration would never be able to stand up to international pressure. Despite everything which has been said and written about Mahinda Rajapakse's hard-line attitude, the fact remains that the LTTE themselves were convinced that Rajapakse was weak. In their eyes, he was an easier option than the better known and more seasoned Ranil Wickremasinghe. This was an important strand in their thinking. It explains why

they prevented voting in the areas under their control in the Presidential election. Had they not done so, the consensus is that the election would have gone Wickremasinghe's way.

As the LTTE saw it, they had succeeded in bringing every Sri Lankan government to its knees. They were convinced that they would win and that this would be the final blow. The time had finally come.

Liberation of the East

After he has set the scene, General Mehta moves on to recount the liberation of the eastern province.¹² Very much in command of his facts, he pieces together the various strands of information to record the progress of military operations with great clarity. Both tactically and strategically, he is able to assess the key decisions made and evaluate the turn of events.

The eastern province contained large tracts of primary jungle and it was ideal for guerilla fighting. The operations here were spearheaded by commandos and special forces, backed up by infantry. In its early stages, the campaign was directed by Brigadier Prasanna Silva. An infantryman with a special forces background, Brigadier Silva understood the nuances of using troops in small operations in this environment. In the recent past, the army had relied on establishing Forward Defence Lines (FDL). This time, they set Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and took on the Tamil Tigers in the jungles.

The jungle terrain restricted the use of heavy weapons and airpower; as a result, collateral damage was very limited. The guerillas were dependent on Tamil villages which were located nearby, in the vicinity of the jungle areas where they operated. It was here that they had their supply dumps and hid their stores of arms and ammunition. For many of the cadres, these villages were also their homes and they often would return to rest and have a hot meal. Probing into the forest in small units, the Sri Lankan army targeted these areas, launching detailed patrols and ambushing the enemy. These tactics upset the guerillas and disrupted their *modus operandi*.

Karuna's defection was an important element in the success of the whole operation and General Mehta leaves us in no doubt of its significance. However the crucial fact is that the

Sri Lankan army, especially the special forces and commandos, had operated in these jungles before and that they had been just as successful in the past.¹³ From 1991-2, the Sri Lankan army had proved so effective in the East that they had managed to establish government control across the province.¹⁴ As a result, the government was able to hold an election in 1993, where almost 70 percent of the population voted. For all his vaunted prowess, Karuna had been unable to halt the army's progress and he was forced to flee to the north. However, in the following years, poor political and military thinking saw the eastern province lost once more. The areas which had been so painstakingly cleared were abandoned and the troops transferred to participate in Operation Riviresa in the north. It was only in 1995, after Riviresa had ended, that Karuna was able to return.

These were the real reasons for the rapid success of the eastern campaign. The Sri Lankan army was already familiar with the environment and they been just as effective in the past. Karuna's defection certainly made their task easier. However, he and his cadres had been bested once before on their home ground.

One of the most extraordinary characteristics of the war in the eastern province was the chorus of derision and condemnation against which the whole operation was conducted. This chorus was led by the opposition United National Party, whose leaders went out of their way to belittle the army's efforts. The army's seizure of the LTTE's great jungle stronghold of Thoppigala was ridiculed by no less a figure than the leader of the Opposition, Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe. Speaking on television at a public gathering at Galle on 17 July 2007 Wickremasinghe dismissed Thoppigala as an empty patch of jungle.¹⁵ Amidst roars of laughter from his own supporters, he asked, "So what is so special about Thoppigala? Its just a useless patch of empty jungle which is larger than whole district of Colombo."¹⁶

This onslaught continued for the greater part of the war and lasted till the capture of Kilinochchi. On 13 November 2008, at the height of the Vanni operation, UNP front-liner Ravi Karunanayake mocked the army's advance in the Parliament.¹⁷ He accused the army of pretending to march towards "Alimankade" (Elephant Pass) when it was really only going towards Pamankade, a suburb of Colombo.¹⁸ Two weeks later, another political heavyweight Mangala Samaraweera, leader of the People's Wing of the Sri Lanka Freedom

Party, personally attacked the army commander. “Sarath Fonseka,” he said. “was not only unsuitable to lead the Sri Lanka army, he was not even fit to command the Salvation Army.”¹⁹

It was an extraordinary set of circumstances, quite unparalleled in the history of recent conflicts. While the army was making unprecedented gains, it was being publicly ridiculed by a large section of the political elite. It is a factor which is not always appreciated and very few analysts have touched on it. One would have expected General Mehta to refer to this, especially in light of its impact on morale and motivation.

From the Falklands to the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan, no fighting force and its serving officers have had to endure this kind of ridicule during a campaign. A sobering lesson to any soldier, it is an unsavoury aspect of democracy at its very worst. Indeed, to search for parallels, one has to hark back to the ancient past, to the bitter party politics of Athens during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC).

The army was also attacked by a section of the press, and there were strong suspicions that military details were being leaked by leading English newspapers and individual columnists. It was also denounced by leading members of the English intelligentsia, several of whom spearheaded a far-reaching campaign against the army. These factors only served to heighten the level of international criticism, putting enormous pressure on the government, the armed forces and the conduct of military operations.

The remarkable fact is that this did not have a crippling effect on morale and motivation.

The reason for this can only lie in the spirit which had been fostered within the armed forces. General Mehta tells us that this was the result of government initiatives to foster public support and raise the profile of the average soldier.²⁰ The Sinhala press and media were extensively deployed to portray the soldiers as national heroes and defenders of the motherland from terrorism.²¹ Honoured and respected in their own communities, the servicemen felt that the country was behind them.²² This was the first time that this had happened in the history of the Eelam War²³ It was a powerful motivating force and it made a huge difference.²⁴

An internal momentum had been generated. The effect was that the *esprit de corps* was so high that it could not be eroded from without; only from within.

The Northern Offensive

General Mehta's account of the northern offensive is once again informative and clear cut.²⁵ Beginning in July 2007 and ending in April 2009, this was a critical operation of immense complexity and enormous difficulty. Far more prolonged than the eastern campaign, it was also far more uncertain. What was so important about this theatre was that the Sri Lankan army was going into these areas for the very first time, after almost seventeen years. Unlike the East, they were operating in territory which was completely unfamiliar and totally hostile. However, General's Mehta's narrative is all too brief, at times sketchy and at others, almost skeletal. Most of his attention is focused on *The Last Battle* and the rest of the campaign occupies a relatively brief section; in fact, it takes up less than half the space devoted to the eastern campaign.

In his narrative of military operations, it would have been helpful if General Mehta had been able look more closely at the nature of the environment in each theatre. Each formation found itself operating under different conditions in different terrains. As the lay of the land changed, so did the way that the enemy used it. This meant that almost every division found itself fighting a different type of battle, sometimes several different battles, during the course of one campaign.

In the north, both the 53 Division and the 55 Division had to fight in the arid, semi desert conditions of the Jaffna peninsula. Temperatures rose to 40 C, water was scarce and shade limited. After the breakthrough had been made, the 55 Division under General Prasanna Silva, found itself fighting along the sands, beaches and lagoons of the North Eastern shoreline.²⁶

Along with the 58, the 53 Division under General Kamal Guneratne was then caught up in bitter semi-urban warfare in the areas around Dharmapuram and Pudukudirrippu. This was a relatively built-up area, closely settled with small towns and villages. The obstacles

here were many and varied, the challenge far more complex and the fighting much more intense.²⁷ One of the specific problems was that the buildings were smaller and the spaces between them were larger, which made the guerillas lines of observation clearer and it was easier for them to use artillery. They were also able to deploy their machine guns to maximum effect, creating areas where the advancing troops were channeled into killing zones.

A key part of the campaign was the role which was given to the 57 Division under General Jagath Dias. This formation spearheaded the crucial thrust which opened the route to Kilinochchi. The LTTE considered Kilinochchi to be their stronghold and they had surrounded it with a network of defences. It is significant that this task was entrusted to Jagath Dias. Dias was an immensely experienced infantry officer who had spent more time in the field than in staff commands. He had seen the war from the position of a platoon commander to general and understood the soldier's mind, his needs and concerns.

However, instead of a launching a frontal assault, the army attacked through the Madhu jungles, outflanking the defences which the LTTE had prepared. This turned out to be one of the most difficult operations, a prolonged and painstaking effort, which inched its way through the forest. These were mostly secondary jungles, full of little trees and scrub with dense, tangled undergrowth. These small trees made it much more difficult to see and the thick undergrowth made the going very difficult. Interspersed with the stretches of jungle were paddy fields, patches of *chena* cultivation, marshy land and scrub. All of these different natural features posed their own challenges as the defenders had prepared each one to their own advantage. It was the transition from one to another which proved the most dangerous for the advancing troops.

The terrain was made even more difficult by the weather. The campaign was fought during the monsoon, often in pouring rain and oceans of mud. Constantly wet and never dry, colds, fever and foot rot played havoc with the advancing troops.²⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Liyanage remembers that a lot of the time they had to walk without boots because their feet were rotting.²⁹ When they finally reached Kilinochchi, it was the first time in months that he was able to sleep under a roof.³⁰

The importance of this theatre has yet to be fully realised. By coming through the jungles, the army caught the guerillas by surprise.³¹ They had not expected the enemy to take this route so they had not mined these areas as heavily.³² It stretched the LTTE, forcing them to fight far from their base in Kilinochchi.³³ They had to transport their troops, their supplies, their armament and their wounded long distances along narrow jungle tracks.³⁴ Prabharakan was compelled to deploy many of his best troops here, using up many of his most experienced cadres and middle level leaders.³⁵ Such was the level of attrition that by the time the 57 Division reached Kilinochchi, it was estimated that Prabharakan had lost 65 percent of his best cadres.³⁶ The Madhu campaign so weakened the LTTE that it opened up many of the other fronts. Reaching Kilinochchi was really the key; as such its treatment in the paper could have been far more substantial.

It was the success of the Madhu offensive which made the western route taken by Brigadier Shavendra de Silva possible. This spectacular campaign was conducted at great speed, with the aid of armour and mechanised forces. Turning the LTTE's entire western defences, this operation eliminated the satellite camps in the vicinity of the Western coastline and cut off the logistics bases connecting the coast to the hinterland.

To the west of Giant's Tank was the Mannar District. Described as the Rice Bowl of Sri Lanka, this was flat, open terrain, abounding in many small tanks and lush paddy fields. During the monsoon, it became waterlogged and marshy.³⁷ To enable his infantry to approach the enemy lines, de Silva dug ditches and entrenchments across open plains.³⁸ The rains flooded many of these entrenchments, causing severe loss of life. "The water level sometimes rose to six feet, while the average Sri Lankan soldier was five foot five or five foot six."³⁹ Many of them were swept away and some even drowned. In these conditions, the armoured and mechanised forces found the going particularly difficult and de Silva's progress was excruciatingly slow. General Mehta notes that in eight months, the troops barely advanced eight kilometres.⁴⁰

Once the 58 Division had fought its way through the LTTE defences, it proceeded rapidly up the coast, overrunning the sea bases which had existed all along the western coast. This severed the links and the routes which the LTTE had cultivated with Tamil Nadu,

depriving them of much needed supplies. It also deprived the Tigers of a vital casualty evacuation route, which they had used ever since the deployment of the IPKF.

The 59 Division, under Armoured Corps officer General Nandana Udawatte, was charged with penetrating the great Andakulam forests, which stretched from Weli Oya to Mullaitivu. These were very different in character to the jungles of the Vanni. They were mostly primary forests, which had never been cut or cleared. Here, great trees grew close together, shutting out the sky and forming a thick canopy overhead. The ground was carpeted with crackling twigs and fallen leaves and sound here carried much further.⁴¹ Unlike the Vanni jungles, there was very little undergrowth and the going was much easier.⁴² The lines of vision too were much clearer and from the tops of trees, you could see for great distances.⁴³ It was here that the Tamil Tigers had brought the Indian Peace Keeping Force to a grounding halt. Since then, the penetration of these forests had been seen as an impossible task and many experts predicted that the Mullaitivu jungle would have been turned in to a killing field.⁴⁴ In February 2009, General AS Kalkat reflected,

The LTTE surprised the IPKF by booby trapping the forest near Mullaitivu; they knew the terrain like the back of their palm and put up fierce resistance...It is one of the most dangerous forests in the world and till the Sinhalese forces defeat the LTTE there, they cannot be called the real victors.⁴⁵

Unlike the two other battlefronts, there were very few populated areas and much of the fighting took place in thick jungle terrain. This environment demanded a completely different way of thinking and it was here that the new concepts and strategies adopted by the army proved so effective.

Starting from Weli Oya, the 59 Division battled its way through Oddusudan to finally reach Mullaitivu on the eastern coast. Once again, the LTTE had never expected this line of attack. They had thought these forests were impenetrable and the army's success caught them completely by surprise. To contain the advance, they had to bring troops from other areas, denuding their defences on other fronts. It was an exhausting and bloody progress. By the time they reached Mullaitivu, this task force was so worn out that most of the

fighting was left to the other army groups. Although very little is heard of this operation, it was of fundamental importance.

The northern campaign was a huge and ambitious operation. It entailed several large formations, proceeding simultaneously on multiple axes across different terrains into unfamiliar territory. The nature of this achievement has yet to be fully realised. In conception, scale and scope, it was completely different from every previous operation; indeed, nothing of this nature had ever been attempted. A triumph of strategy, planning and execution, it was also a huge feat of coordination and control. The progress of each operation was constantly monitored and its execution closely supervised. In almost every meeting with the senior field commanders, I observed that the phone would ring every few minutes, even late at night. Specific questions would be asked and detailed, sometimes lengthy explanations would follow.

The Last Battle

A great deal of General Mehta's account of the northern campaign is devoted to *The Last Battle*.⁴⁶ This forms the largest and the longest part in the whole paper. Dealing with the events of end of April 2009, it recounts the last days of Prabharakan and the Tamil Tigers. Although it is undoubtedly the most interesting episode from a political point of view, from a military perspective, it is perhaps the least interesting and the least useful. By this stage, the die had been cast and the conflict had assumed the character of a straightforward struggle for survival between an increasingly desperate LTTE and an increasingly dominant army.

General Mehta is very definite in his opinion of this last phase:

The cost of victory ignored...charges of genocide and war crimes and a humanitarian catastrophe. There were reports of 20,000 dead in the No Fire Zone between 22 April and 19 May.⁴⁷

In his conclusion, General Mehta observes that the Sri Lankan experience is a model which India could almost never follow. "It follows a policy of minimum force applied in good

faith, with the use of heavy weapons and airpower almost always avoided.”⁴⁸ It would be unfair to judge the general’s narrative on the basis of information to which he does not have access. However, it is here that the lack of first hand material begins to count. In its absence, General Mehta’s account of this last phase becomes dependent on the secondary authorities which he has to work with. It becomes a tale of numbers and movements, and as such, it tells us little and the lack of detail is often telling.

The Tamil Tigers’ use of civilians has been widely acknowledged.

The IPKF observed a number of LTTE battlefield innovations. The LTTE cadres were always accompanied by an equal number of unarmed personnel. Their function was to provide extra ammunition, to recover weaponry from their own fallen cadres and it was their job to carry away the bodies of slain LTTE personnel. If they could not remove a corpse, they clothed the body in a *lungi* to create the impression that the slain person was a civilian.⁴⁹

A closer look merely underlines the enormous difficulty which the troops faced in distinguishing between bona fide civilians and fighting cadres. In the fast moving circumstances of a running battle, the challenge this posed does not seem to be appreciated. The LTTE frequently used children and suicide bombers as offensive weapons, almost like tanks. Charging ahead, they would blast a way through the defences. The cadres would then pour through the breach.

Civilians fighting as soldiers, wearing T shirts and trousers. The first you see is when they are running towards you. Young boys and girls. You have only a few moments to think. And then it is too late.⁵⁰

In these circumstances, restraint was dangerous; hesitation often fatal.

The details of close combat infantry fighting, against utterly reckless and suicidal opponents, is surely worth closer study. It is a scenario which is difficult for a conventional infantry force to imagine. One particular story vividly illustrates the challenges which had to be faced:

We were advancing in a line. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a suicide truck appeared. It came full speed at us, bumping across the ground. We didn't have time to think. The sergeant shouted "RPG, RPG!" It gave us time. The sergeant was blown up but we stopped the truck.⁵¹

Clarity of thought combined with speed of action; these were the qualities which the infantryman relied on to keep himself alive. His life depended on his reflexes and his reactions; he had to think on his feet in order to survive.

General Mehta goes on to talk about the horrendous human cost of the campaign,⁵² mentioning the "callous lack of concern for civilian casualties" demonstrated by both Prabhakaran and "his opponents."⁵³ Up till now, the General had confined himself to sure ground and his assessments have been cautious and measured. Leaving aside the issue of primary sources, there is a whole range of secondary material on this subject. *The details* suggest that there are many issues which need to be considered.

Not only did many of the guerillas not wear uniforms, once injured, they also tended to change their clothes.⁵⁴ Another practical problem was the difficulty of separating civilian casualties from LTTE casualties.⁵⁵ Testifying before the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, the Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse underlines the importance of this fact.

If the military suffered, you can imagine the number of LTTE casualties. They all put these figures into the civilian casualty figures. Obviously, if the army suffered that much, it was at least the same amount of casualties from the LTTE. I'm sure that it is much more because of the firepower of the government forces. Nobody knows how much and nobody talks about it.⁵⁶

There were also the restraints which were imposed on the use of indirect fire, such as artillery, mortars and airpower.⁵⁷ The advancing troops were called on to identify the nature of their targets before they opened fire.⁵⁸

By doing that, I should say that we suffered more casualties. We took that risk; obviously, you are restricting some of your fire. We had to use only the personal weapons. Soldiers had to move in, identify and shoot. That was a step we took to protect civilian casualties. Nowhere in the world is this done.⁵⁹

These issues are now well known and all of them need to be borne in mind.

One of the most daring operations of the war was launched specifically to release the civilians trapped within the No Fire Zone at Pudumattalan. The objective was to seize the earthen bund which the LTTE had erected across the shallow waters of the Nandi Kadal Lagoon. Nearly ten feet high and covered with thick palmyrah fronds, it was nearly three kilometers long. Designed to keep the army out, it was also a barricade which kept the civilians in.

Colonel Ralph Nugera, the Commander of the Commando Brigade was one of those entrusted with the task of capturing the bund.

The first challenge was to cross the lagoon, across the open ground and through the water. It was very exposed and there was no cover. The second was to seize the wall and make a breach. If we succeeded in taking it, the people trapped within the camp would be able to get through. If we didn't sort out the defences and the people tried to come, the casualties would be huge.⁶⁰

Nugera described the absolute chaos which ensued once his men had seized the embankment:

They were firing artillery at us. Luckily, the LTTE had very few heavy weapons left, but they were sniping at us from amongst the people as they were trying to get away. While everybody was running towards us, the cadres were shooting at us from behind them. We held on to our positions. We could only shoot when we were certain. Yet even in the middle of all this hell, the people screaming, running here and there, my men remained calm. They continued to take aim, firing at the cadres whenever they could get a shot.⁶¹

This is but one example, but my impression is the restraint exercised by the Sri Lankan troops was considerable. By Monday, 20 April 2008, the bund had been breached and pictures beamed all over the world showed hundreds of thousands of people crossing the lagoon into army lines. It was one of the most memorable episodes of the conflict, yet it barely figures in General Mehta's narrative.

General Mehta draws our attention to the importance of public opinion in Tamil Nadu and India, observing that the last offensive was timed to coincide with the end of the Indian elections.⁶² On this issue, his judgment is correct. While this writer was in the conflict zone, he was puzzled by the lack of activity during this period.⁶³ Every delay and every ceasefire gave the guerillas more time to build more defences, dig more trenches and lay more mines. The political factor cost the Sri Lankan army dearly. Every day lost saw more soldiers killed and wounded.

In the areas controlled by the Tamil Tigers, the fabric of civilian life was interwoven with the military cause. Walking through the huge LTTE encampment at Pudumattalan in the No Fire Zone, this was the reality which struck me time and time again. There was no distinction between civil and military. This was a community at war. Bunkers and sandbags were made out of women's saris, while home-made hand grenades lay scattered outside tents.⁶⁴

Everywhere you turned there were bunkers; like the grenades, they were rough and ready made. Even a stranded lorry had a purpose. Wedged into the sand, its undercarriage had been removed and the ground beneath carved out. Ingenious and unusual, as a strongpoint, it was as good as any.⁶⁵

People flying in fear of their lives only have the clothes on their backs. We have been told that the LTTE had forced their people from their homes. Yet they had time to bring their possessions, beds, tables, desks, chairs and even cupboards.⁶⁶ Some had even brought their gates,⁶⁷ while others had found time to bring their pets⁶⁸ As the Tigers had retreated, the people had fled with them. Gathering up their worldly goods, they had carried them as they went. They had not been driven from their homes; they had left them willingly, believing and trusting in the future of Tamil Eelam.

The thousands of casualties alluded to by the international media conjure up images of enormous graveyards running the length and breadth of the encampment. On foot, however, the picture appears very different. Although the camp itself was vast, despite all the reports of wanton bombing and shelling, the sea of tents and huts stretched as far as the eye could see. They were so densely packed that a few determined efforts would have been enough to ensure that whole areas were destroyed. Although blackened patches here and there showed where fires had raged, these were few and far between. There was little evidence of the vast swathes of devastation which have been talked of, still less of the graveyards said to stretch for miles.⁶⁹

Some authorities have already begun to question the casualty figures which have been put forward. One of them is Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, a well-known expert on the Sri Lankan conflict and Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (CPVTR) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.⁷⁰ Between July and September 2009, Gunaratna conducted a number of interviews with Tamil doctors and Tamil civilians present in the No Fire Zone during the last days of the conflict.⁷¹ Based on this material, Gunaratna feels that the real figure was much lower than the numbers suggested by the international media. “The doctors told me that they were forced by the LTTE to give highly inflated figures to the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera.”⁷²

Gunaratna notes two factors which have been widely overlooked. He points out that for most of the fighting, civilians were not widely involved or affected. This was because the LTTE had moved all non-combatants deep into territory held by them before it faced the advancing army. As a result, casualties at this stage were very low. Gunaratna’s second point is that “civilian” casualties only really began to occur when they were caught up in the very last phase of the fighting.⁷³ According to his research, Gunaratna estimates that between 01 January and 19 May 2009, the number of non-combatants who lost their lives may have been as low as 1,400.⁷⁴

General Mehta does not mention the very real and concerted efforts made by the armed forces to care for the thousands of civilians who came across their path. The process of screening, registering, feeding, transporting and providing medical attention to the thousands of men, women and children flooding in, was a huge logistical task for a fighting

force on the move. The more ground the army made, the more civilians crossed over. The civilian issue compelled the formulation of an entirely separate administrative and logistic policy. It was given a lot of thought and great resources, supplies and manpower were devoted to it.⁷⁵ The material on this is well known and widely published.

The need to conduct an operation of this nature not only imposed major military restraints; it posed a huge challenge for the advancing troops. Many of the escaping thousands had LTTE links, had been fighting cadres and some were suicide bombers. Private Saman Kumari was one of the several women soldiers from the 58 Division who had been deputed to meet the fleeing refugees as they crossed into army lines.

They always come at first light.. We give them water and search them and check their bags. They are frightened and so are we. There was one woman, she was about thirty. We had looked at her bags but we had not searched her body. She told us that she had lost her gold jewellery. She started crying and everyone gathered around to help. I left the other women soldiers with her and went to eat. Then we heard the sound. All we could see was smoke. People were screaming and there were pieces of flesh everywhere. She had strapped the bomb to her stomach. Before, we used to pick up the children and carry them. We used to carry their bags. Now we know. Even a small child can carry a bomb. Now we search everyone.⁷⁶

Sadly, this aspect of the campaign has yet to be explored. Very few armies in the world have had to conduct a major humanitarian operation at the same time as fighting a war. For the individual men and women of the Sri Lankan army, it also entailed the risk of life and limb.

If the Sri Lankan armed forces had indeed used the full weight of the weapons at their disposal during the last phase, their task would have been easier and it would have been finished much sooner. Certainly, it would not have dragged on until early May. The issue which has not been raised is the price which the Sri Lankan army had to pay. One soldier whose unit was involved in this phase recalls that of his platoon of 30, only six survived the

bitter fighting which characterised the last days of the Eelam War.⁷⁷ What did these tactics cost in terms of dead and wounded?

In these circumstances, perhaps the question which should be asked is how many armies would have behaved in the same manner? However imperfect it may have been, surely this is a model which any country would be proud to follow.

Creating Capabilities: The Sri Lankan Military and the LTTE

In the past, every military operation had focused on a particular area. As a result, the LTTE had been able to manoeuvre, redeploy and gather its strength. As General Mehta emphasises, the multi-pronged strategy ensured that the LTTE was never able to switch forces.⁷⁸ This strategy denied the guerillas the space and freedom which they had come to take for granted. Now they found themselves pinned down on every side, never sure where the next thrust would come from.

The nature of this pressure was relentless.⁷⁹ The LTTE had always relied on long intervals between each and every operation, which allowed them to rest, rebuild and regain their strength. This relentless onslaught on several fronts took the guerillas completely by surprise.⁸⁰ Wearing the Tigers down, it brought them to the point of exhaustion, taxing their resources and sapping their spirits. “We fought 24 hours. Just as the enemy was getting ready to rest, another team was getting ready.”⁸¹ This was something which the guerillas had never had to face before and it completely disrupted their *modus operandi*.

Deception and surprise lie at the very heart of counterinsurgency warfare. To deceive and to surprise, is what Fonseka set out to do. Appropriating the element of surprise, it was now the army who did the unexpected, even when it was the more difficult thing to do.⁸²

To this purpose, Fonseka attacked the enemy where he least expected, where he was strongest or where he felt most secure. Coming through the jungles of Madhu, Weli Oya and Mullaitivu, the army took the LTTE completely by surprise. The LTTE had never anticipated this and as a result, the forests were far less heavily mined than had been

feared.⁸³ A new emphasis was put on night operations and the army now made a habit of attacking at night, something which it had never done before.⁸⁴

It was realised that the large infantry formations which had characterised previous campaigns were not effective.⁸⁵ Large groups had less penetration, they presented a bigger target and hardly ever achieved surprise.⁸⁶ In their stead, new tactics were introduced, involving teams of four and eight. These smaller units proved themselves much more capable of surprise and were far more penetrating.⁸⁷ In the past, the guerillas had known exactly where the army was; “The terrorist looks at where we are and then he fights.”⁸⁸ By their very nature, these four and eight man teams were very adaptable, for they encouraged flexibility and initiative. This meant that the LTTE no longer knew where the army units were or what they would do. Now that they were on the receiving end, they were much more uncertain than before and there was an element of fear in their minds.

This element of fear and uncertainty was enhanced by the use of long range units, which penetrated deep into enemy territory.⁸⁹ This denied the Tamil Tigers the freedom of movement which they had come to rely on.⁹⁰ The impact on the LTTE leadership was considerable. Undermining their confidence, it put them under immense pressure. It was now the guerillas who felt vulnerable. “Every time an LTTE leader went anywhere, large numbers of cadres would have to be taken out of the line, just to picket the route.”⁹¹ By attacking along multiple axes, the army kept the LTTE guessing. In marked contrast to previous campaigns, now they never knew where the main attack would fall. Maintaining the element of surprise, operations were now conducted in the foulest weather and the army fought through the monsoon. This served to keep up the pressure on the guerillas, forcing them to make more mistakes. No one had ever expected the Sri Lankan army to be so adaptable.

In the past, the lack of battle field intelligence had been a major handicap.⁹² This had been the cause of many military failures. Intelligence had previously been the responsibility of the brigade in the area of operations.⁹³ Fonseka reorganised the whole system.

We decided that through the use of small groups, we could obtain much better battlefield intelligence. This would achieve far better targeting and ensure that the correct command decisions were made.⁹⁴

General Mehta identifies the role reversal which took place. “The conventional SLA was fighting using guerilla tactics, while the Tigers were forced to fight conventional set piece battles.”⁹⁵ In the two sections *Opposing Strategies* and *Creating Capabilities*, he looks at the remoulding of the Sri Lankan army. Previous tactics had revolved around trying to gain territory. The new tactics concentrated on inflicting the maximum casualties on the terrorists and destroying their infrastructure.⁹⁶ General Mehta is correct in his appreciation of this factor, as it marked a significant change and it made a huge difference.

General Mehta titles one section *Creating Capabilities: The Sri Lankan Military and the LTTE*. This is exactly what General Sarath Fonseka did. He created a capability, a sense of the possible and it transform the Sri Lankan army. By improving the capability of the Sri Lankan infantryman, he gave him confidence and made him self- reliant. This transformed the infantryman into an aggressive, offensive weapon and made it possible for Fonseka to take on the guerillas at their own game.

Mehta tells us that “Fonseka overhauled the SLA’s battle fighting techniques, tactics and strategy.”⁹⁷ This revolution in the way in which the Sri Lankan army thought and functioned was all important. It saw the conversion of a conventional army into an army of small units, where regular infantry thought and functioned like special forces. How did this take place? What was done and how was it done? The importance of training and retraining was absolutely crucial. It is here that we feel the lack of detail.

Changing the mentality of an entire fighting force is a major achievement. From a military point of view, it is one area of study which we cannot afford to overlook. In this context, it is regrettable that General Mehta does not have access to the necessary material. In the right hands, it is a story of some importance. It would be both fascinating and revealing to see the impact of the various training programs and gauge their effect.

Continuous recruiting was an important factor on Fonseka's strategy. He made it a point to ensure that there were adequate reserves to cater for every contingency. This numerical strength made it possible for the Sri Lankan army to dominate and control the areas which it captured.⁹⁸ This was a vital part of any counterinsurgency operation. Without the presence of troops on the ground, it would not be possible to create the secure environment needed to re-establish the administrative control.⁹⁹

Mehta uses the issue of recruitment as an indicator to measure the changing nature of the army.¹⁰⁰ This is an interesting and useful technique and he draws our attention to some noteworthy statistics. One is the fall in the desertion rate, which had been as high as 10-15 percent. During Fonseka's term, this was brought down by almost half.¹⁰¹ By any standards, this is an extraordinary turnaround. Mehta also points to the increase in the numbers enlisting.¹⁰² Even at the height of the fighting, when the risk factor was at its greatest, there were large numbers willing to join. It is a singular achievement for any country in the middle of a war. For a volunteer force, it is even more remarkable. It underlines the level of public support and commitment throughout the country, a fact which has frequently been misunderstood and underestimated by the English-speaking elite and the international community. It also reveals the extent to which the military and political leadership had been able to mobilise the population, changing the widely established perception of an unwinnable war. Nothing succeeds like success and continuous victories on the battlefield caused the youth to rally round the Army.¹⁰³ "When we started winning, the country and the people started believing in us."¹⁰⁴

It would be interesting to see some of recruitment statistics for the American, British and other NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan. The level of public commitment gave the Sri Lankan army the numerical strength it needed to hold the territory which it had won. As we have seen, this is a vital factor in fighting a guerilla war. It is something which the USA, the UK and its allies are as yet unwilling or unable to provide.

Faced with new tactics and assailed from all sides, the LTTE found itself too thin on the ground; yet, it tried to hold every inch of ground in an ever widening arc. As Mehta observes, this was a fundamental mistake. Instead of changing its tactics, the LTTE continued to fight a vastly superior army on its own terms. "On the battlefield,

Prabhakaran repeatedly made the error of fighting a conventional battle instead of employing superior guerilla tactics.”¹⁰⁵ Flexibility and imaginative thinking are fundamental to the success of any guerilla struggle. These qualities had once characterised the LTTE’s approach and they had always demonstrated them in the past. However, when confronted with a change in their enemy’s approach, the guerillas failed to adapt. This was one of the reasons behind their failure.

Prabhakaran’s greatest mistake, however, was his least apparent. The LTTE’s use of civilians as human shields has been hailed as a very effective military and political tactic. By taking the civilians with him, Prabhakaran invented a potent military weapon. Providing the LTTE with a never-ending pool of manpower, it also constrained the army’s freedom of action. When the guerillas could no longer disappear into the surrounding environment, they were able to blend into the surrounding population. This meant that collateral civilian deaths were almost inevitable. It provided the LTTE with an explosive political and media weapon, generating mounting outrage and condemnation right across the world.

Over the last decade, the LTTE had established a parallel administration throughout the north and east of Sri Lanka. As their name, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam suggests, they saw themselves as the army of the Tamil people. It was the source of their legitimacy and the foundation of their power. Prabhakaran as the self proclaimed leader of the Tamil people, had to have the people with him; they were a living part of his nation.

In fulfilling his political destiny, Prabhakaran lost sight of the military realities of guerilla war. By taking the local population with him, he gave the army a free hand to clear and consolidate the territory which it occupied. By concentrating the people and the cadres together, the LTTE exposed itself, making the army’s job far more straightforward. Had Prabhakaran left the civilian population in place, the task would have been far more difficult and infinitely more complex. A much greater number of troops would have been needed to secure the areas under the army’s control. It would also have been far more difficult to target the guerillas if the villagers had remained amidst the newly occupied territories. The advancing troops themselves would have been far less secure and much more vulnerable. Instead of advancing, they might have had to take a more defensive approach. Indeed, a campaign which had been completed in less than three years might still be continuing today.

Sri Lankan Air force

Major General Mehta asserts that one of the cardinal factors behind the military success was the supremacy achieved by the Sri Lankan air force.¹⁰⁶ Although airpower had its uses tactically, it was never a strategic factor. There is no doubt that the air force made an important contribution. Trenches and strongpoints hidden deep in the sand and scrub were attacked with precision.¹⁰⁷ The intelligence provided by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) also provided vital information on the battlefield. In the words of one infantryman, “they were able to go where we could not go and see what we could not.”¹⁰⁸

In an unconventional conflict of this nature, it is important to realise that airpower could only have a limited effect. Except for the final stage, for the most part, the LTTE defences were very well hidden, well constructed and well thought out. Often impervious to artillery and inaccessible from the air, many of them could only be reached from the ground. Ultimately, it was the willingness of the infantry to go forward and die which made the difference.

LTTE

Taken overall, General Mehta’s analysis of the LTTE is informed and insightful. Quoting security expert Zachary Abuza, Mehta emphasises the tremendous originality and inventiveness which had been the secret of the LTTE’s phenomenal success for so long.¹⁰⁹

Although it may have had its parallels elsewhere, the employment of the suicide bomber as an offensive weapon both as a political and military tactic was one of the unique characteristics of the LTTE’s *modus operandi*. Mehta tells us that the number of suicide attacks launched by the Tamil Tigers was far greater in number than Hamas and Hezbollah combined.¹¹⁰ As far as the LTTE were concerned, it was a regular part of their armoury, which they deployed time and time again with devastating effect. The use of suicide as a weapon on the battlefield demands further study, for it has relevance for fighting forces all over the world.

General Mehta draws our attention to the LTTE genius for improvisation.¹¹¹ This found its outlet in the great variety of mines, booby traps and improvised explosive devices, which were invented out of the most basic materials, with the simplest technology. The LTTE's ability to camouflage, disguise, surprise and trap was one of their greatest strengths and it was the rationale behind many of their fortifications and defences. While General Mehta mentions the ditch cum bund,¹¹² there were also many other types of defences: the elevated sniper points, the tiny armoured bunkers, the tank pits and the booby traps. This is yet another area which deserves further attention and study. Surely there are lessons to be learned here?

The use of the media is a subject which has become a vital theatre in the global concern with terrorism. The Tamil Tigers were particularly skilled in harnessing this resource and it is an area which calls for further research. There has already been pioneering research in this field by Dr Harinda Vidanage, who has looked at the use of cyberspace by the Tamil Diaspora.¹¹³ The western media's reporting of the LTTE had always been a factor which the Tigers felt that they could count on. Military operations were reported in terms of human tragedies causing untold loss and suffering to civilians. As an example:

Artillery pounds wounded Tamils trapped on beach

A thousand amputees were among the wounded and dying waiting to be rescued from a beach in northeast Sri Lanka yesterday, according to aid agencies. Frightened Tamil families, the latest victims of the country's 26-year civil war, were hiding in makeshift trenches as they came under artillery fire while waiting to be evacuated from Puthumathalan beach.

*Marie Colvin, The Times (London), 22 March 2009*¹¹⁴

The objective was to demonise the Sri Lanka army and humanise the guerillas. Not surprisingly, any advance by the military was drowned in a chorus of condemnation, as reports of army atrocities were swiftly relayed around the world, setting off a storm of protest, concern and sympathy¹¹⁵

By cutting off the media pipeline, the government of Sri Lanka made it possible for the army to proceed. This was something the Tamil Tigers had not foreseen. The western media was so powerful an arm, that the LTTE took its freedom for granted, assuming there was nothing the Sri Lankan government could do to control it. They believed that the media would provoke so much outrage in south India and the west, that sooner or later there would be foreign intervention. The timing of the huge mass protests in western capitals like London is revealing. The closer the end came, the larger and more desperate the protests became.

Effective though it was, the Sri Lankan government's strategy was a double-edged sword. "Denying observer access to the battlefield drew charges from the west of having something to hide."¹¹⁶ In this conclusion, General Mehta is absolutely right. Starved by the government of news, the media was fed by the Diaspora, in whose hands, it proved a potent weapon. During the final phase, this mounting media outrage gave rise to accusations of wholesale slaughter and genocide. It was this perception which led to desperate, last minute attempts, by the USA and then the foreign ministers of Britain and France, to save the LTTE. Thus, in a way, the LTTE were right- media pressure did precipitate international outrage and it did lead to an attempt at intervention. Their great mistake, however, was to imagine that it would be successful.

The question which General Mehta should have asked is what else could the Sri Lankan government have done? What else would any government have done? From a military point of view, the danger of having outside observers on a battlefield is acknowledged by soldiers right across the world. In Iraq and Afghanistan, some of the most distinguished western reporters have been allowed to work as embedded journalists with the forces of their own country. Complete outsiders, however, have not.

Given the attitude of the western media and the history of leaks which had previously characterised the Eelam War, was this a risk which Sri Lanka could afford to take? The alternative is all too clear. If the media had not been kept out, the army would have found its every move under scrutiny. Its every step would have been dogged by protest and condemnation and ultimately, the offensive would have ground to a halt.

Perhaps this issue could have been avoided by having observers from neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and allies like China and Russia. Ultimately, this was a risk which the Sri Lankan government chose not to take.

In the final analysis, there can be little argument with General Mehta's assertion that Prabhakaran made a fundamental mistake in fighting a conventional war. However, let us try to see it from Prabhakaran's point of view. General Mehta evokes these shrinking horizons very well.

The loss of Kilinochchi transformed the horizontal boundary into a vertical one, running along the A-9 from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya. The Tigers were squeezed into a shrinking perimeter north of Mullaitivu, reduced from a territory of 15,000 sq. kilometers to land the size of a football field.¹¹⁷

The LTTE, he tells us, "had no Plan B and concentrated all its fighters in a diminishing box off the Mullaitivu coast."¹¹⁸ It is difficult to continue fighting a guerilla war when you no longer have the freedom of manoeuvre and are confronted on all sides. Trapped within a diminishing area, what can you do when you no longer have the physical and mental space to operate? What else is there to do but stand and fight?

Conclusion

Major General Mehta's final analysis is incisive and sobering. This reviewer cannot but agree with his opinion that although Sri Lanka has set a new paradigm on the use of force, it has only done so at a huge diplomatic price.¹¹⁹ It is a price which it is now paying. How high the final price will be, remains to be seen.

It is Mehta's opinion that, "the winning formula could not have been cobbled together without Delhi's active and passive assistance."¹²⁰ Although there is no doubting the role played by India, the majority of Sri Lankans would view this rather differently. From their perspective, perhaps it would be more correct to say that "the winning formula could not have been cobbled together without China and Pakistan's active and passive assistance."

As Mehta himself admits, when India refused to supply Sri Lanka with the arms and armament which it needed, it was Pakistan and China who stepped in to fill the breach.¹²¹

As most Sri Lankans and many foreign observers would agree, it was China's support which made the difference. Many analysts feel that China's involvement and support was crucial in influencing India's decision to support the Rajapakse administration. Given its previous support for the Tamil Tigers and the importance of Tamil Nadu in Indian politics, there are many who doubt that India's support would have been so wholehearted, if Rajapakse had not obtained Chinese support.

In this context, Mehta cites Presidential Advisor Razik Zarook, "If India tries to stop Sri Lanka, Colombo will get even closer to China."¹²² It is difficult to believe that this was not a consideration behind India's decision. It was, to all intents and purposes, the recognition of a *fait accompli*. Once China had decided to support Sri Lanka, given its own interests in the Indian Ocean region, India had no option but to go along. Mehta himself admits as much. "With the elimination of the LTTE, India's strategic marginalisation is an impending reality."¹²³

While admitting that "there are lessons to learn from Sri Lanka's military success,"¹²⁴ General Mehta is keen to emphasise that India is different. India, he says, cannot follow the Sri Lankan example, as it believes in bringing insurgents to the negotiating table to join the political process.¹²⁵ In this context, he could have and perhaps should have pointed out, that nearly seven attempts had been made by successive governments to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table. The question which arises is what does one do when the terrorists refuse to come to the negotiating table? As Mehta himself agrees, the political process was something which the LTTE turned their backs on. What does one do in those circumstances? What does any nation do?

Operation Blue Star, the assault on the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1984, is one example which comes to mind. Although it was determined not to damage the holy shrine, the Indian government found that it could not resolve the situation without breaching it. Major General Brar had hoped to force Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his militants into surrendering. However, this did not happen and the first few waves of commandos were

repulsed with heavy losses. Tanks were then called up and the militants were pounded into surrender, and in the process, one of India's holiest shrines was severely damaged.

The future poses interesting questions for Sri Lanka's great neighbour. What she will do, one wonders, when she is faced with a similar challenge from within, while at the same time, it is encouraged from without? This is the nature of the challenge which Sri Lanka has had to master. Far from not having anything to learn, these are problems which India too will have to confront, if and when she faces a major crisis, either on her north-western border with Pakistan and or her north-eastern borders with China. Should either the Kashmiri issue or the tribal demands in Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura, reach uncontrollable proportions, these will very soon be very real concerns.

General Mehta's paper is a well argued defence of India's foreign policy objectives, based on her national interests. In this context, he echoes the calls for a political solution which have been made by India, the United Nations and the western powers. Right from the very beginning, he voices the opinion that "the root of the problem has not been addressed,"¹²⁶ an impression which he reiterates at the very end, "the cause that led to the insurgency has been brushed aside."¹²⁷ The word 'solution' signifies the permanent resolution of a question. For a political solution to work, it has to be acceptable to all sections of the community. In a democracy, that includes both the majority and the minority. Only then can it endure, and only then can it become a solution.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has been consistent in his insistence that a permanent resolution to Sri Lanka ethnic tensions can only come from within. This, perhaps, is the only way forward. The last political solution - the Indo-Lanka Accord - was imposed on Sri Lanka from outside. It did not result in peace- only in more fighting. It is now widely acknowledged that the conflict may well have been resolved in 1987, if India had allowed the Sri Lankan army to clear the peninsula. As it was, Indian intervention only succeeded in prolonging the conflict and fuelling the JVP rebellion against the government. The JVP insurrection lasted from 1987-9 and resulted in a bloody civil war amongst the Sinhalese, which cost more than 60,000 lives.

The whole episode only serves to underline a basic reality. The solution that everybody else desires may not be desirable for Sri Lanka; it may not even be workable, and ultimately, it is Sri Lanka which will have to pay the price. This is something which India and the outside world have yet to understand. Only then, can there be a permanent resolution.

In this context, it is important to point out that the Sri Lanka of today is no longer the country that it was before the last Eelam War. As Sri Lanka has changed, so have her politics and so, has her idea of her place in the world. Despite the immense pressure which has been applied by the United Nations, the western powers and India, Sri Lanka continues to go her own way. After having defied all the odds and come through the very worst, it is unlikely that this administration will give way on anything less. To force it to do so would only exaggerate, increase tensions and shore up trouble for the future.

The Sri Lanka of today is much bolder and far more confident, far less likely to be dictated to and far more attuned to her own rhythms and priorities. It is a story which all those dealing with Sri Lanka should try to understand, for it is the reality which they will encounter.

Notes

¹ This review is based on the author's personal impressions and experience of the last Eelam War. Much of the material was gathered during the course of the author's visits to the war zone between 19 March and 27 April 2009, during the last stages of Eelam War IV. These visits were made possible with the permission of the Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka. Some of this material is also based on the author's experience of the Weli Oya region in 2001-2002. This reviewer is particularly indebted to Brigadier Hiran Halangode (Retd) for his help and guidance.

² Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," *Manekshaw Paper 22*, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2010, pp. 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁴ Interview with General Sarath Fonseka, 2008

⁵ Mehta, n. 2, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁷ C Christine Fair, *Urban Battle Fields of South Asia: Lessons learned from Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), pp. 43-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-46

⁹ Mehta, n. 2, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Pudumattalan, 26 April 2009. Cf. SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda, "The Sari Bunkers of Pudumattalan," Unpublished Manuscript.

¹² Mehta, n. 2, pp. 4-6.

¹³ Interview with Brigadier Hiran Halangode (Retd), 2008.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁵ “Thoppigala Ranil Wickramasinghe,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_k9LqFjmKKc, *Independent Television News* (ITN), Sinhala, 17 July 2007, accessed on 23 July 2007.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ “Ravi Karunanayake,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc71_XP1nKg, *Independent Television News* (ITN), Sinhala, 04 January 2009, accessed on 07 January 2009.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ “Mangala Samaraweera,” *Lanka Newspapers*, http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2008/12/36114_space.html, 03 December 2008, accessed on 07 December 2008.
- ²⁰ Mehta, n. 2, p. 22.
- ²¹ “Api Venuwen Api” (“For Us, On Behalf of Us”) - advertising campaign 2008-2009.
- ²² Interview with General Jagath Dias, GOC 57 Division, Kilinochchi, 27 April 2009.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Mehta, n. 2, pp. 7-10.
- ²⁶ See SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda, “Sri Lanka: The Last Phase in Eelam War IV- From Chundikulam to Pudumattalan,” *Manekshaw Paper* 13, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2009.
- ²⁷ Interview with General Kamal Guneratne, GOC 59 Division, Pudukuduirippu, 20 March 2009.
- ²⁸ Interview with General Jagath Dias, GOC 57 Division, Kilinochchi, 21 March 2009.
- ²⁹ Interview with Lt Col LK Liyanage, Pudumattalan, 26 April 2009.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Dias, n. 28.
- ³² Liyanage, n. 29.
- ³³ Dias, n. 28.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Interview with Brigadier Shavendra de Silva, GOC 58 Division, Kilinochchi, 20 March 2009.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Mehta, n. 2, p. 8.
- ⁴¹ Weli Oya, 2002.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Interview with Major Keerthi Gunasoma, Brigade Major, Weli Oya, 2002.
- ⁴⁴ Sergei De Silva-Ranesinghe, “Downfall of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *South Asia Defence and Strategic Review*, 06 June 2010.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Mehta, n. 2, pp. 9-10.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ⁴⁹ Fair, n. 7, pp. 22-3.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Soldier, 53 Division, Pudukuduirippu, 20 March 2010.
- ⁵¹ Interview with Soldier, 55 Division, May 2010.
- ⁵² Mehta, n. 2, p. 22.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁴ Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Testimony to *Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission* (LLRC), Colombo, 17 August 2010, <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2010/08/17/gotabhaya-rajapaksas-testimony-to-the-lessons-learnt-commission-live/>, accessed on 19 August 2010.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Interview with Colonel Ralph Nugera, Commander Commando Brigade, Kilinochchi, 25 April 2010.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² Mehta, n. 2, p. 10.
- ⁶³ 24-27 April 2009.

- ⁶⁴ Pudumattalan, 26 April 2009. See Tammita-Delgoda, n. 11.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Quoted in telephonic interview with Express News Service. See “Civilian toll in last phase of Lankan war 1,400,” *Lanka Sun* 25 May 2010, http://lankasun.com:8000/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12370&Itemid=26, accessed on 26 May 2010.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Ibid.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda, “The casualties of Sri Lanka's brutal civil war,” *The Independent*, 16 April 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-casualties-of-sri-lankas-brutal-civil-war-16692>, accessed on 17 April 2009.
- ⁷⁶ Interview with Private Saman Kumari, Vallipuram, 31 March 2009.
- ⁷⁷ Interview with Private Priyadharshana, 55 Division, May 2009.
- ⁷⁸ Mehta, n. 2, p. 8.
- ⁷⁹ Guneratne, n. 27.
- ⁸⁰ Dias, n. 28.
- ⁸¹ Interview with Colonel Ralph Nugera, Kilinochchi, 31 March 2010, and 25 April 2010.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Liyanage, n. 29.
- ⁸⁴ Nugera, n. 81.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ Halangode, n. 13.
- ⁸⁹ Guneratne, n. 27.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid.
- ⁹¹ Liyanage, n. 29.
- ⁹² Nugera, n. 81.
- ⁹³ Ibid.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid.
- ⁹⁵ Mehta, n. 2, p. 8.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁹⁸ Interview with Major General Mendaka Samarasinghe, Security Forces Commander- Jaffna, 30 March 2009.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁰ Mehta, n. 2, p. 13.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰² Ibid.
- ¹⁰³ Interview with General Jagath Dias, 27 April 2009.
- ¹⁰⁴ Nugera, n. 81.
- ¹⁰⁵ Mehta, n. 2, p. 17.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 14.
- ¹⁰⁷ Tammita-Delgoda, n. 26, pp. 15-6.
- ¹⁰⁸ Interview with Major Senaka Premawansa, 55 Division, Pudumattalan, 30 March 2009.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mehta, n. 2, p. 16.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹¹² Ibid., p. 24.
- ¹¹³ Harinda Vidanage, *Exploring the impact of online politics on political agents and political strategies in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora*, PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2009.

¹¹⁴ Marie Colvin, “Artillery pounds wounded Tamils trapped on beach,” *The Times*, 22 March 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5950376.ece>, accessed on 24 March 2009.

¹¹⁵ SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda, “Reading between the lines,” *The News*, 05 April 2009, <http://jang.com.pk/thenews/apr2009-weekly/nos-05-04-2009/pol1.htm>, accessed on 07 April 2009.

¹¹⁶ Mehta, n. 2, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.