

# Understanding SRI LANKA'S



# Defeat of the TAMIL TIGERS

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**A**fter three decades of conflict, Sri Lanka's government defeated the ethnic separatist insurgent group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), popularly known as the Tamil Tigers, in May 2009. The violence and brutality employed by both sides in the final years of the conflict drew significant interest from the global civilian and military communities, especially when Sri Lanka credited its callousness to civilian casualties as a key to its success. The defeat of the LTTE added to the debates over U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and the role of lethal force in counterinsurgency. Some have advocated that the United States consider employing such tactics as part of an effective COIN campaign, utilizing recent cases such as Sri Lanka and Chechnya to bolster their case.

In October 2009, *Indian Defense Review* author V.K. Shashikumar listed eight

principles, the so-called Rajapaksa Model, of Sri Lankan COIN.<sup>1</sup> Sri Lankan military and civilian leaders believe the application of these principles enabled the government's victory:

- political will
- go to hell (that is, ignore domestic and international criticism)
- no negotiations
- regulate media
- no ceasefire
- complete operational freedom
- accent on young commanders
- keep your neighbors in the loop.

These harsh principles stand in stark contrast to the population-centric approach articulated in U.S. military doctrine. Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, counsels an approach that attempts to influence and

persuade the population to willingly side with the counterinsurgent by providing a superior alternative to the insurgent cause. Key to this philosophy is the concept of protecting civilians from insurgent influence and avoiding unnecessary collateral damage.<sup>2</sup> The differences between the two approaches are significant and cut to the heart of ongoing doctrinal debates over the way ahead in Afghanistan and future counterinsurgency operations. Do Sri Lanka's eight fundamentals account for the defeat of the LTTE and validate the effectiveness of ruthless counterinsurgency tactics? If so, what are the lessons for U.S. COIN operations?

## Overview

The LTTE is the main insurgent group representing the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.<sup>3</sup> The British imported the Hindu Tamils from southern India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as

laborers for colonial plantations. Eventually, the Tamils multiplied to become 13 percent of the population of Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> Most of the island's population comprises the majority Buddhist Sinhalese, who due to their numbers controlled most major organs of civil society following independence in 1948. Since that time, the Sinhalese have implemented a series of laws imposing their culture on the Tamil minorities, isolating them and de facto rendering them a subclass. After years of political strife and unrest, the Tamils formed legitimate and illegitimate resistance movements in the 1970s. Small-scale attacks against government forces by Tamil rebels expanded during that decade and became widespread by the early 1980s.

Unrest culminated in full-scale guerrilla war beginning in 1983 in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where significant Tamil populations lived. The Tamil insurgent groups united into the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers, and began a campaign of violence to overthrow the government and gain autonomy in Tamil areas. Led by the brilliant but ruthless Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE embraced the

widespread use of terror tactics in addition to standard guerrilla warfare. The Federal Bureau of Investigation credits the LTTE with mainstreaming suicide tactics as a terror tool globally.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the conflict, the LTTE employed suicide tactics against military and civilian targets, causing hundreds of casualties. Armed with external funding from Tamil expatriates in India and the West, the conflict steadily escalated. Thanks to its superior tactics and Prabhakaran's intellect, the LTTE achieved control of significant areas of Sri Lanka, winning decisively against poorly trained government forces.

government and cause unrest. Eschewing international norms, the group recruited child soldiers in its campaign against the government. Despite the international outcry, the LTTE maintained funding and logistical support through its well-organized expatriate network, supplemented by arms trafficking and other criminal enterprises.<sup>6</sup>

The war attracted the involvement of numerous regional and global powers, which pressured both sides to negotiate an end to the conflict. A temporary ceasefire brokered by India in 1988 resulted in the brief deployment of Indian peacekeepers to the island.

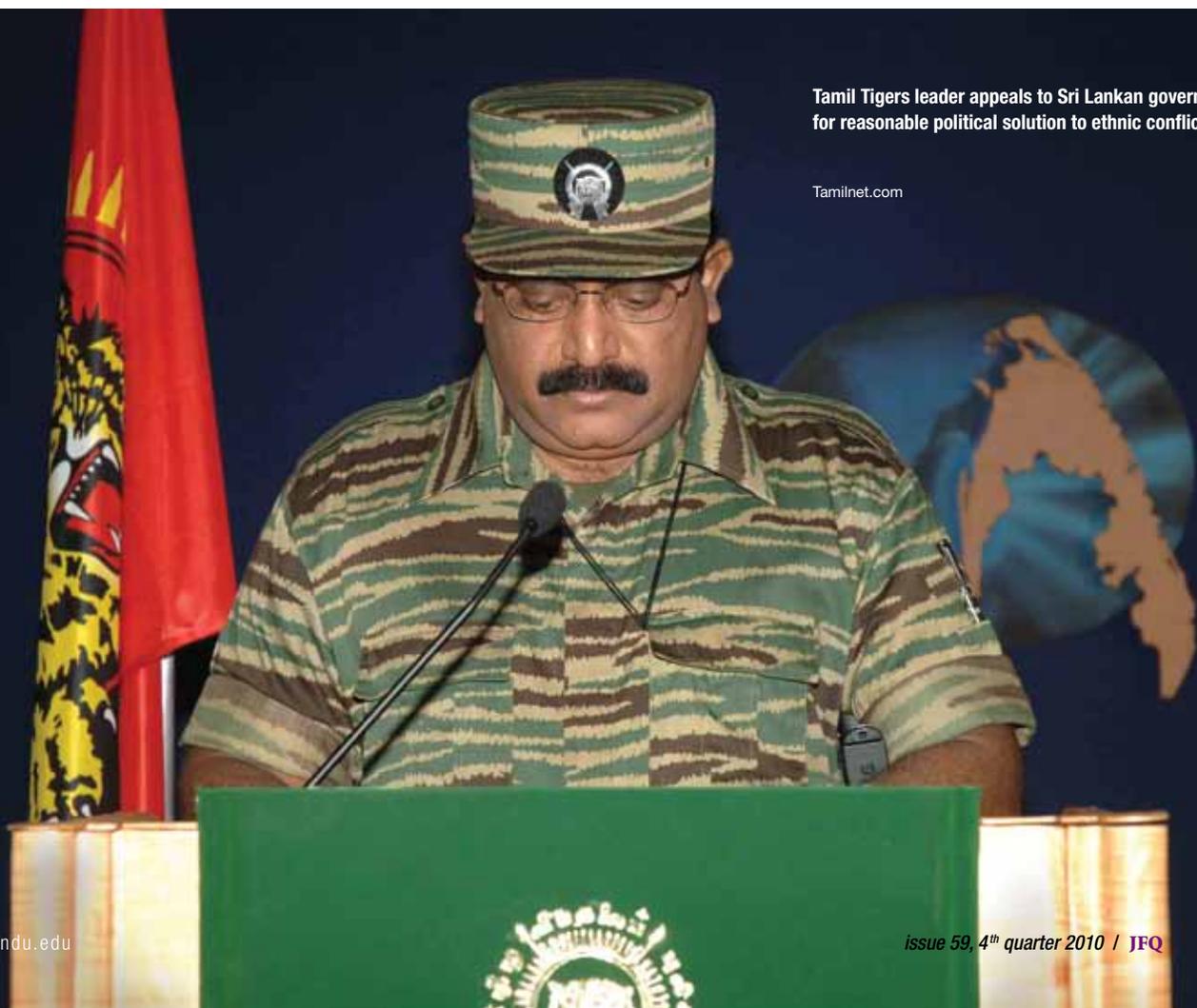
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The conflict remained bloody throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with atrocities against civilians alleged by both sides resulting in mass migration and displacement of a quarter-million people. The LTTE continued to employ suicide bombing to destabilize the

The Indian army soon found itself in violent conflict with the LTTE and distrusted by the majority Sinhalese. Frustrated and caught in a no-win position, the Indians withdrew in 1990 after sustaining over 1,200 casualties. In retaliation for the intervention, the LTTE



**Tamil Tigers leader appeals to Sri Lankan government for reasonable political solution to ethnic conflict**

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targeted and assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. This mistake cost the group significant support among Indian Tamils, alienated by the assassination of their prime minister and the ruthless terror tactics employed by the LTTE. Undeterred, the LTTE continued its violent strategy, refusing to renounce terrorism as a tool in its struggle. Although momentum shifted regularly in the conflict, by the late 1990s both sides reached a temporary stalemate.<sup>7</sup> Negotiations resulted in a shaky ceasefire from 2001 to 2006. How each side used the ceasefire would prove decisive once hostilities resumed.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government came to power in 2005 promising to crush the LTTE.<sup>8</sup> In late 2006, large-scale fighting resumed.<sup>9</sup> Newly invigorated government forces launched an unrelenting—and stunningly successful—campaign to destroy the group at all costs. Over the next 2 years, a revitalized Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE in numerous battles. The army liberated

characterized the government's victory as a "rare success story for governments fighting insurgencies." In the same article, the retired head of India's Sri Lankan peacekeeping force characterized the defeat of the LTTE as having turned conventional COIN theory on its head.<sup>11</sup> Other commentators and bloggers have echoed these sentiments or used them to criticize America's approach to the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The subject of lethal force in COIN has been a recurring topic on counterinsurgency blogs and in recent articles.<sup>12</sup>

Sri Lanka's own generals credit lethal tactics for defeating the LTTE. The government and military unquestionably strived to destroy the LTTE regardless of the outcry about civilian deaths. Sri Lanka's defense minister, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, confirmed to the BBC that "there was a clear aim ... to destroy the LTTE no matter what the cost." The United Nations estimates the final LTTE offensive from January to May 2009 resulted

in 7,000 civilian deaths and 16,700 wounded—a controversial figure that represents the high end of death estimates. In addition to the casualties incurred, the final fighting caused the displacement (and the problems inevitably accompanying it) of over 200,000 civilians.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous human rights groups criticized Sri Lanka's lack of regard for civilian casualties and the summary justice meted out against sus-

pected LTTE sympathizers by Sri Lankan soldiers during the offensive. Although the exact numbers of civilians killed is subject to much debate and question, the Sri Lankan government offensive made no special effort to avoid harming civilians when it suited the military need of destroying the LTTE. In addition, the LTTE displayed little regard for its own people, increasing the human toll by using civilians as shields from attack and executing those fleeing or defecting to Sri Lankan army lines.<sup>14</sup> The relatively rapid and decisive results of Sri Lanka's aggressive tactics and final offensive require further analysis to validate the effectiveness of brutality in counterinsurgency.

### Decisive Years: 2004–2009

Evidence indicates Sri Lanka's victory was the product of far more than simple changes in tactics and decisions to ignore the international outcry over civilian casualties. From 2001 to 2006, numerous seismic shifts occurred in the regional and global strategic environment that moved the balance of power decisively in favor of the Sri Lankan government. Taken together, these evolutionary changes hollowed the LTTE as an effective organization, enabling the decisive government victory. Critical factors included the defection of key personnel from the LTTE, significant reductions in LTTE external funding, an improved Sri Lanka Army and Navy, support from China, and fallout from the 2004 tsunami. The cumulative effect of these changes devastated the rebels' ability to continue the conflict.

The LTTE loss of income to sustain its campaigns proved crucial to the outcome of the insurgency. Long a pariah of the international community because of its terror campaigns, the LTTE relied on expatriate support and smuggling to fund ongoing operations

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and governance in insurgent-held areas. To support its cause, the LTTE developed an extensive expatriate funding network across numerous Western countries that provided millions annually in assistance.<sup>15</sup> This network began to unravel in the 1990s following the assassination of Gandhi. The LTTE's suicide campaigns and attacks against civilians resulted in the United States declaring the LTTE a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997, and the group was upgraded to Specially Designated Global Terrorist status in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks due to its role in supplying global terror groups.<sup>16</sup>

Most decisively, Canada outlawed the LTTE's funding networks in 2005. The loss of expatriate funding was devastating. The networks in Canada alone provided an estimated \$12 million annually to support the LTTE.<sup>17</sup> The European Union undertook similar measures in 2006 to prevent expatriate

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Sri Lanka army commando

many population centers from rebel control. Prabhakaran was unable to stymie the assault into the LTTE heartland by government forces, who killed him in March 2009. The rebels, isolated and forced into a tiny corner of the island, were broken by a final government offensive. An LTTE representative conceded defeat on May 17, 2009, ending 26 years of open conflict.<sup>10</sup>

### Reaction to Defeat

Contemporary news reporting on the defeat of the LTTE contributed to the idea that Sri Lanka's victory stemmed from the employment of ruthless tactics. In the *Los Angeles Times*, reporter Mark Magnier



Sri Lankan soldiers rehearse for Independence Day celebration

remittances. In an extremely short period, the LTTE lost almost all financial support from expatriates in the West, at a time when the government was growing stronger even as the LTTE organization was under great stress on numerous fronts.

A major shift in the Sri Lankan balance of power occurred in 2004 when senior LTTE commander Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, so-called Colonel Karuna, defected from the LTTE after a disagreement with Prabhakaran. Karuna's split and reconciliation with the Sri Lankan government deprived the LTTE of several hundred experienced fighters and significant support.<sup>18</sup> In exchange for amnesty, Karuna provided assistance to the Sri Lanka army and advice on defeating the LTTE. The defection highlighted growing internal dissent within the hierarchy and also eroded popular legitimacy within the Tamil population. Over time, this weakened the LTTE's grip in the eastern portion of the country, as Karuna formed a Tamil political party endorsed by the government.<sup>19</sup> The opening of a sizeable Tamil party cooperative with the government reduced the LTTE's support in some areas, providing a war-weary population an alternative to Prabhakaran's iron-fisted rule and a potential future voice in Sri Lankan politics.

As the LTTE struggled with internal dissent and resource constraints, Sri Lanka embarked on a crash program to improve its military and economic capability to defeat the rebels. The most decisive factor enhancing Sri Lanka's ability to combat the LTTE involved significant economic and military aid from China. Traditionally, the United States, European Union, Japan, and Canada provided the majority of military assistance for the Sri

Lankan government. Beginning in 2005, China stepped in to provide an additional \$1 billion of military and financial aid annually, allowing the LTTE to sever the strings attached to Western aid regarding the conduct of anti-LTTE operations. In exchange for the aid, China received development rights for port facilities and other investments. These actions enabled China

to increase its influence in South Asia against its regional rival India and secure stability on its southern flank.<sup>20</sup>

China's aid enabled the Sri Lankan government to attain the military superiority needed to defeat the LTTE. The Sri Lankan military budget rose by 40 percent between 2005 and 2008, and the army's size increased by 70 percent, an addition of nearly 3,000 troops per month.<sup>21</sup> Sri Lanka army professionalism grew as result of a decade of investment in professional military education. Increased funding and capable, aggressive leaders allowed the formation of elite counter-guerrilla units to combat the LTTE. These units were able to acquit themselves well in combat, demonstrating this capability repeatedly in the 2007–2009 offensives.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the army expansion, the improvement of the Sri Lanka navy between 2002 and 2006 played a critical role in strangling the LTTE's lucrative smuggling trade. Significant investments in small boat forces proved decisive. The navy invested in hundreds of 14-meter and 17-meter boats to complement its existing force of Israeli-built Super Dvora fast attack craft. With the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2006, the navy took the offensive with new equipment and better trained officers. Armed with light weapons on fast boats, the navy was able to swarm and overwhelm the LTTE's limited naval forces. By fighting a series of small boat engagements, the navy isolated the northern coast of Sri Lanka in 2007, defeating the LTTE's small boat force and sea-based warehouses used to support smuggling operations. These operations

effectively shut down the LTTE's ability to acquire revenue through illicit arms trade, further exacerbating its financial crisis.<sup>23</sup>

China provided more than simple financial support. It and several other states furnished the government with crucial political cover in the United Nations. Western countries long demanded that Sri Lanka respect human rights and avoid civilian casualties as a condition of continued aid. The government viewed these conditions as a hindrance to its ability to defeat the LTTE. The substitution of Western military aid with that from China enabled the government to disregard Western concerns about human rights and pursue its campaign of attrition unimpeded. China prevented introduction of resolutions at the United Nations critical of Sri Lanka's renewed offensive, giving it a free hand in the conduct of its operations despite the protests of human rights groups and Western governments. Without this diplomatic coverage, Sri Lanka would have faced a much tougher time sustaining its military expansion and pursuing its ruthless campaign to defeat the LTTE.<sup>24</sup> In exchange, China received several lucrative development contracts in Sri Lanka and greater influence against rival India in South Asia.<sup>25</sup>

The devastating tsunami in December 2004 also contributed to the collapse of the LTTE. The damage was most extensive in the LTTE-dominated northeast region.

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Political wrangling prevented large amounts of aid from reaching LTTE-controlled areas, contributing to the isolation and financial ruin of the Tamil population. The Sri Lankan high court blocked a tentative agreement in June 2005 to allow sharing of tsunami aid with the LTTE. Allegations of corruption tainted the limited aid that did arrive, undermining the credibility of LTTE leaders among the people. Shortly thereafter, the tenuous ceasefire began to break down, preventing further aid from reaching the LTTE. Under intense pressure, the United



Internally displaced Sri Lankans receive medical treatment at camp clinic

Nations and other development agencies caved to the government's demands.<sup>26</sup> Economic losses and the devastation of Tamil areas affected popular will to continue the struggle and support the LTTE.

An examination of Sri Lanka's victory reveals the LTTE's collapse was the result of cumulative external and internal forces, not simply the employment of ruthless new tactics. Indeed, there is little beside the ability to disregard Western criticism that distinguishes Sri Lankan tactics or brutality post-2005 from earlier eras, as the conflict was already one of the most violent and ruthless in the world. Critical blows from internal defections, loss of external funding, a global antiterrorist mindset after 9/11, and second-order effects of the 2004 tsunami crippled the LTTE. At the same time, foreign aid, domestic politics, and external political cover from China enabled the Sri Lankan government to resume its COIN campaign from a position of strength. The combination of these factors proved decisive in the defeat of the LTTE.

Those who wish to use the LTTE's defeat as a foil for criticizing U.S. COIN doctrine have adopted an overly simplistic narrative of the LTTE's defeat. These critics have missed the larger picture of what occurred in Sri Lanka. Appropriate and legitimate debate continues as to the significance of population-centric tactics practiced by the U.S. military during the surge to the successful reduction of violence. Without doubt, numerous changes in the wider internal and external dynamics of the conflict coincided with the tactical shift and accelerated the turnaround in Iraq.

Likewise, by 2009, the LTTE was a shadow of its former self, bankrupt, isolated, illegitimate, divided, and unable to meet an invigorated government offensive of any kind. At almost every turn, the LTTE made profound strategic miscalculations in the post-9/11 environment by continuing its use of terror tactics despite a fundamentally changed global environment. Failing to realize this shift, Prabhakaran made poor strategic and tactical choices that doomed his movement long before the government began its final offensive. Taken together, these conditions proved essential to the collapse of the LTTE after nearly 30 years of conflict. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> V.K. Shashikumar, "Lessons from the War in Sri Lanka," *Indian Defence Review* (October 3, 2009), available at <[www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/10/lessons-from-the-war-in-sri-lanka.html](http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/10/lessons-from-the-war-in-sri-lanka.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps War-fighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, December 2006), para. 1-124-1-128.

<sup>3</sup> Angela Rabasa et al., *Beyond al-Qaeda, Part 2: The Outer Rings of the Terrorist Universe* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2006), 68-79.

<sup>4</sup> John C. Thompson and Jon Turlej, *Other People's Wars: A Review of Overseas Terrorism in Canada* (Toronto: The Mackenzie Institute, 2003), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Taming the Tamil Tigers from Here in the U.S.," January 10, 2008, available at <[www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/tamil\\_tigers011008.html](http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/tamil_tigers011008.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson and Turlej, 34, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Rabasa, 68-74; Thompson and Turlej, 34, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Anbarasan Ethirajan, "How Sri Lanka's Military Won," BBC News, May 22, 2009, available at <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8063409.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8063409.stm)>.

<sup>9</sup> "Government Ends Ceasefire with Tamil Tigers," Agence France-Presse, January 2, 2008, available at <[www.france24.com/france24Public/en/archives/news/world/20080102-sri-lanka-tamil-tiger-cease-fire-end.php](http://www.france24.com/france24Public/en/archives/news/world/20080102-sri-lanka-tamil-tiger-cease-fire-end.php)>.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Wax, "Sri Lankan Rebels Admit Defeat, Vow to Drop Guns," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2009, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/17/AR2009051700086.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/17/AR2009051700086.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Magnier, "Sri Lanka's Victory May Offer Lessons," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2009, available at <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/may/23/world/fg-sri-lanka-lessons23>>.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Porter, "Brutality. . .," June 24, 2009, accessed at <<http://kingsofwar.wordpress.com/2009/06/24/does-brutality-work/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Bharatha Mallawarachi, "U.N. Envoy Heads to Sri Lanka; Civilians Flee War," *Chattanooga Free Press*, May 15, 2009, available at <[www.timesfreepress.com/news/2009/may/15/un-envoy-heads-sri-lanka-civilians-flee-war/](http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2009/may/15/un-envoy-heads-sri-lanka-civilians-flee-war/)>.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: Events of 2009," *Human Rights Watch World Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010), 347-354.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart Bell, "Canada a Key Source of Tamil Tiger Funding," *National Post*, July 20, 2009, available at <[www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1810040](http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1810040)>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets U.S. Front for Sri Lankan Terrorist Organization," press release, Washington, DC, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Bell.

<sup>18</sup> C. Bryson Hull, "Sri Lanka Can Defeat Tigers, Top Ex-Rebel Says," Reuters India, November 13, 2008, available at <<http://in.reuters.com/article/southAsiaNews/idINIndia-36488720081113>>.

<sup>19</sup> "Interview: 'Colonel Karuna,'" Al Jazeera, April 29, 2009, available at <<http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/04/2009428165514786905.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> Somini Sengupta, "Take Aid from China and Take a Pass on Human Rights," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2008, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/weekinreview/09sengupta.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/weekinreview/09sengupta.html)>.

<sup>21</sup> Magnier.

<sup>22</sup> Shashikumar.

<sup>23</sup> Tim Fish, "Sri Lanka Learns to Counter Sea Tigers' Swarm Tactics," *Jane's Navy International* (March 2009), 20-25.

<sup>24</sup> Sengupta.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Nimmi Gowrnathan and Zachariah Mampilly, "Aid and Access in Sri Lanka," *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* (June 2009), available at <[www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=3003](http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=3003)>.