

Transforming from Conventional to Unconventional: How Theory of Naval Warfare was applied for a Successful Naval Campaign

JSK Colombage

Sri Lanka Navy Headquarters, P.O. Box 593, Colombo 01, Sri Lanka
jayanathskc@yahoo.co

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka emerged victorious in year 2009 by militarily defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) following a near three decade protracted conflict. The Sri Lankan winning formula against the LTTE contained many facets. The Sri Lanka Navy's (SLN) contribution remains as one of the deciding factors in this historic victory. In addition to the victory over the LTTE naval capability, SLN experience in the maritime warfare spectrum remains probably as the only such exposure a conventional naval force has ever experienced. In this context the SLN was once identified as the 'only operational Navy' in the world by media. The SLN experience provides an ideal research, a case study in asymmetric warfare at sea in the contemporary history. Preserving the freedom of the seas is a top priority and the right of vessels to travel freely in maritime waters and also have an access to ports is an essential element of national security (Carr 2010). SLN exposure to the maritime asymmetric innovations of Sea Tigers, the sea going unit of LTTE made it to evolve from a status of a conventional force mastering on unconventional tactics. The continuous challenges that were posed by the Sea Tigers hindered the SLN supremacy out at sea. As LTTE depended primarily on the sea routes for supplies, disruption of the same was a critical factor in winning the war. Combat at sea is dynamic, hazardous and also unpredictable, especially when it is under the shadow of asymmetric warfare. Destruction of LTTE arms supply routes was therefore cited as a decisive blow to LTTE by many maritime security experts. SLN played an imperative role in obliterating terrorism, and had a multi layered approach in maritime security which integrated activities of various stake holders with complementary objectives at three levels of overlapping responsibilities in the fields of; port security, shipping security and maritime defence. In devising an appropriate intensification strategy to destroy LTTE, SLN paid more consideration on regulatory

changes, aspects of leadership, resource availability and contemporary technology. As most maritime forces are prepared, trained and geared to meet conventional threats, many tend to give less attention to the threats posed by non-state actors. In the present day maritime environment, a nation may treat this asymmetric or the irregular approach imprudently and one may not realize how threatening this asymmetric warfare at sea could turn out to be, if neglected.

II. THE SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

LTTE exploited the sea very effectively in developing their war-fighting capabilities and became a threat to the territorial integrity of the country. The dynamics of sea control was exploited by both sides with varying degree of success and failures. There were times that both sides could not control the sea areas fully and many battles were fought to regain or to maintain the sea control. Unlike on the land, sea control can't be obtained by occupying a certain sea area. Sir Julian S Corbett, a renowned naval theoretician identified that as 'the normal state was not of a commanded sea but of an un-commanded sea' (Huston 1957). The LTTE had a clear strategy to gain sea control as they realized the value of the sea for their sustenance and growth. The Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL), on the other hand had to keep the sea lanes of communication open (SLOC), commercial ports secured and to maintain freedom to operate in all seas and connected water ways.

Incontrovertibly, the LTTE was one of the most powerful and ruthless maritime terrorist organization in the world with a well-developed and a well-tested capability for acts of maritime terrorism (Raman 2004). The Sea Tigers had a well-structured command organization and its own attack, logistics and suicide craft squadrons, which were capable of operations even in high seas along with a sizable merchant fleet. LTTE was also involved in large-scale trafficking of drugs to western markets with its fleet of about 12

commercial ships registered in states providing flags of convenience. The cash generated from those illegal sales were used, initially to buy small arms in Cambodia, where they were available in plenty at low prices, being left over from the conflict in the past (Khurana 2006). In many ways, LTTE was considered as the leader, or a trend setter, in maritime terrorism. Possibility existed for technology and tactics transfer between various terrorist groups which aspired to acquire maritime capabilities and for further imitator acts of terrorism as occurred in the case of the US Cole and MT Limburg. The theory of 'Operational Art' predicts that the LTTE would have continued to leverage asymmetric tactics to defeat the SLN. However, SLN became a fully functional, operational Navy and used Operational Art campaign by executing traditional and non-traditional concepts of Sea Control. Not many navies have engaged in real battle conditions at sea since the Falkland War in 1982.

At the initial stages, SLN was unable to stop war-fighting materials being transported by sea and landing in LTTE controlled areas. There was a time that the navy did not have an effective counter action for Sea Tiger suicide and swarm tactics. LTTE succeeded in acquiring large quantities of weapons, ammunition, explosives & transported these through international ports, sea lanes to coastal location within their control. This helped LTTE to develop and sustain war-fighting capabilities until changes were effected to policy and strategies in year 2005. Sea Tigers were a trend setter in maritime terrorism and pioneered the suicide craft, under water suicide saboteurs, under water improvised explosive devices and reconnaissance by submersible vessels. SLN evolved with the threat to overtake and overwhelm, by radical changes in its inventory; attitude, the way it trained and the way it fought. SLN, having trained and aligned on a conventional naval mindset was found to be reactive in facing the development of LTTE Sea Tiger activities at sea. Inability to counter-act decisively in the face of highly dynamic and fluid situations found navy struggling in maintaining the SC.

IV. EXPLOITATION OF OCEANS BY LTTE

A popular theory that prevailed with the belief of 'that there could be no maritime terrorist organization in the world' came into being primarily because the core components of a terrorist

organization is based on its strength in achieving surprise at will and withdrawal after an attack when conducted on land. As these core elements are easily lost when an attack is carried out in the seas, many argued that maritime terrorism cannot thrive in achieving its organizational objectives. The close link that the LTTE had with seas off the northern areas of Sri Lanka is not a connection that was formed overnight. 'Sea' has been always a strong bonding element of the LTTE due to many of its cadres being primarily either fishermen or related to fishing activities. Knowing the seas around them, geared with seamanship knowledge, knowledge of various approaches to landing areas, knowledge on sea routes etc. had provided the LTTE cadres with the valuable acquaintance that they require to dominate the seas around them. The very close nexus between Tamil Nadu and LTTE at the initial stages are based on the criticality of the short sea route the two countries shared in the northern peninsula. Maritime interaction with Tamil Nadu through its fleet of few fishing boats continued till the final phase of the conflict. In the 80s, particularly after the anti-Tamil riots in 1983, Tamil Nadu served as a training ground and sanctuary for the LTTE (Prashar 2007).

Free flow of small arms along with many other counterfeit items flourished primarily due to lack of an effective monitoring and surveillance on either sides of the IMBL. The city of Jaffna was also within easy reach as a logistics hub for the LTTE as the GOSL had marginal control of the port facilities and even less of the local seaborne trade (Povlock 2011). With the official formation of the LTTE Sea Tiger wing in year 1984, it mainly concentrated on the establishment of a sea supply route between LTTE northern strongholds and South India.

With the early developments being identified by the GOSL, late President JR Jayawardene on 3 October, 1985 wrote to then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi highlighting the importance of having effective surveillance and monitoring the activities in the Palk Strait as mainly the fishermen from Velvettithurayi (VVT) have mastered the navigation skills to frequent between Tamil Nadu and VVT without navigational charts or any other navigational aids (Dissanayaka 2004). Velupillai Prabhakaran and the other founding leaders of the LTTE like Sathasivam Krishnakumar alias 'Kittu' are known for their familiarity with the seas as they originated from the coastal town of VVT (Sridhar 2004).

V. EVOLUTION OF SLN AND LTTE

According to Admiral (Retd) Wasantha Karannagoda (former Commander of the Navy), 'SLN evolved rather reactively than proactively and started attacking the enemy'. The evolution of the 'Mother Ship Concept' in the SLN in this time frame can be seen as yet another reactive strategy which focused on forming a surveillance zone in the northern waters. This concept expanded the Fast Attack Craft (FAC) operational range to a greater extent through extended logistics support given by the bigger platforms known as the Surveillance Command Ships (SCS). The FACs which formed into organized squadrons began to operate under operational and tactical command of the SCSs and achieved number of successes.

It took no time for the LTTE to realize the damage that has been caused by these ships and commenced targeting the SCSs using suicide craft. The SCSs were vulnerable mainly due to its size, lack of manoeuvrability, speed and fire power. FACs then had to shift from its former task to provide close protection and escort to SCSs. With the commencement of the Eelam war II in 1990, LTTE began attacking naval units whenever the opportunity arose. With mounted pressure from SLN units, LTTE resorted to employing a very effective tactic against the SLN, 'the suicide boat'. In mid 90s, LTTE changed its tactics to a greater extent by introducing craft with high speeds and a weapon outfit which could deliver a heavy fire power. This was found to be more lethal with the introduction of 'wolf-pack' attacking method used extensively to isolate and outnumber SLN units prior achieving total destruction. With suicide threat, new tactics and element of surprise, escort duties as well as other surveillance patrols of the Navy became hindered to a greater extent.

SLN gradually started to realize that they are facing an enemy who is capable of outmaneuvering on tactics and rapidly adopting to the changing nature on the maritime domain. SLN's mid 80s perception of the LTTE started to gradually change. When SLN first encountered a group of fishermen engaged in smuggling activities across the Palk Strait, SLN would have never ever imagined that the Sea Tigers will reach a level which could challenge SLN's dominance over its territorial waters. What SLN started to comprehend was that 'a group of fishermen who ventured out to sea in fiber glass dinghy boats are no more the same old fashioned

fishermen but are an organized group that has acquired expertise of maritime terrorism'.

As the Sea Tigers continue to exploit SLN's vulnerability in the slow speed of the convoys, number of attacks was launched by the Sea Tigers on the SLN convoys adding further pressure on the naval fleet to ensure that the vital connectivity is maintained. The major impact was felt on the much needed troop transfers to the Jaffna peninsula to keep the battle rhythm. Transferring less number of troops in low speed vessels made the whole operation a riskier one.

Evolving largely around the Sea Tigers, SLN came into responding through a reactive strategy until the naval leadership correctly understood the importance of outmaneuvering the Sea Tigers strategically and tactically. The naval units had to look into safe escorting of vital supplies and troops to the northern peninsula, carryout surveillance patrols, protect harbours/coastal installations and perform ground role in order to ensure that Navy had the total Sea Control.

Since its inception, the SLN was in a reactive mode rather than proactive. This paid SLN a high price at crucial times of the conflict mainly due to losing the tactical and operational edge over the enemy. The evolution of the Sea Tigers not only made the Navy a formidable fighting unit, it also changed the way how SLN reacted. This evolution took place from evolving through rapid change of operational concepts of the SLN in taking over the much warranted Sea Control the Navy was fast losing and quite often challenged by the LTTE.

V. DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS IN GAINING SEA CONTROL

Since the best protection for a naval force is to be unlocated in the vast ocean, the force must not only develop measures for achieving this condition in wartime but must set things up accordingly in advance, in peacetime (Rubel 2010). One key component in gaining success in sea control is not only limited to having the best weaponry, other assets and tactics, but a major weightage needed to be given to command and control component and other doctrinal aspects. The U.S. Navy allowed this discipline to erode in the Vietnam era, when it focused all its energies on power projection. Consequently, when a true Sea Control challenge arose, in the form of the Soviet Fifth Eskadra during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the U.S. Navy had

neither the weapons nor the tactics to deal with the situation (Goldstein & Zhukov 2004).

According to Goldstein & Zhukov, the following factors are found to be decisive in the success of gaining sea control; Unopposed: Military objectives can be achieved without significant losses, Opposed: Military objectives can be achieved, but losses may be significant, Denied: Military objectives cannot be achieved and/or there is a high probability of unacceptable losses, Capacity: The combat power a force can bring to bear in a local operations area—a critical factor in attrition warfare, Capability: The attributes a force possesses that determine its potential to disrupt an adversary, Information Dominance: The situational understanding required to operate forces with relative advantage under dynamic circumstances, Tactical Readiness: A force's ability to perform its assigned missions effectively in battle as a function of tactics, training, and procedures, Maneuver Space: The constraints and conditions within which a naval force must operate.

VI. CONCEPTS AND THEORIES OF NAVAL WARFARE

Along with a focus on the 'Asymmetric Warfare at Sea', other key theories and concepts such as 'Sea Control', 'Operational Art' and 'Game Theory' were considered. These four main theoretical concepts are considered crucial in identifying how SLN evolved from a conventional platform into an unconventional platform in defeating the LTTE Sea Tigers.

Theory of *Asymmetric Warfare* has been in existence since the dawn of time. A classic asymmetric conflict is one involving at least two parties and where the challenging party is considerably smaller in number and/or in resources to the defending party (Mack 1975). According to Metz (2001), "asymmetry" in warfare is 'acting, organizing, and thinking differently than opponents in order to maximize one's own advantages, exploit an opponent's weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action'.

The theory of *Sea Control* is recognized as the Navy's capability to use an area of sea for its own determinations for as long as essential to realize those purposes and to deny that ability to others. Great maritime tacticians such as Sir Julian Corbett

and Alfred Thayer Mahan have reasoned that Sea Control can only be accomplished through battle with hostile forces or through acceptance by both sides of the likely concerns of such a battle if it was fought.

In the Joint Doctrine, *Operational Art* is defined as 'the employment of military forces to attain strategic and/or operational objectives through the design, organization, integration, and conduct of campaigns, major operations, and battles. In a war environment, Operational Art plays a key role in determining where, when and for what key determinations will the major forces fight over time. A greater significance has been given by Sun Tzu, when he stated that 'Warfare is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of life and death, and the way to survival or extinction.

In generic form, *Game Theory* helps us to acquire an understanding of certain situations where decision makers interact. Taking the very basic meaning of 'Game', it implies competitiveness where certain number of players deals with each other in accordance with governing rules. According to Turocy (2001), Game Theory is the formal study of conflict and cooperation. Game theoretic concepts apply whenever the actions of several agents are interdependent.

VII. ORGANIZATIONAL DRAWBACKS OF SLN

On the specific study area of the 'organizational drawbacks of SLN', available literature found to be very limited in scope and depth. No major study on the aspect of Navy's drawbacks on its major components have been done. This is found to be a vacuum in this field as no serious study has been taken place in order to assess the strategic as well as tactical drawbacks of the Navy in the battle against the Sea Tigers. As the researcher is a very senior naval officer who had the opportunity of taking part in the full spectrum of the conflict, observations made during his tenure is considered in looking at the drawbacks.

Ladduwahetty (2014) highlights a significant fact pertaining to the early wakening of the highest political figures in the country of the requirement of strengthening the Navy in mid 80s. When this strategy of denying supplies to the LTTE was presented by signifying the importance of having a Navy with a stronger role, it has been positively considered by the late President J.R. Jayawardene.

But when presented to the high command in the military (which primarily consisted personnel from the Army), the strategy of giving Navy a more important role in the operations; it was treated with scepticism. Major drawbacks sighted by the researcher are primarily three fold; Policy, Strategic and Tactical.

Study on Policy Drawbacks played a vital role in identifying the importance of having a strong maritime defence for an island nation like Sri Lanka. This is so crucial in formulating its overall defence strategy aligned with the Grand National strategy. Historic evidences bearing maritime invasions on Burma by King Parakramabahu-1 can be sighted as one great example to highlight the naval capabilities of Sri Lanka. This success in making and maintaining sizable naval fleet can be seen as one of the most important strategic aspects identified by the ancient rulers. After the independence in year 1948, emphasis has been mainly focused on developing the Army in particular.

In formulating the grand strategy, tactical components are necessary to map the connectivity of strategy and tactics. One can never form a strategy without giving due consideration to the tactical aspects. Identifying enemy's tactical moves can be sighted as one of the most important first clues to gauge enemy's grand strategy. SLN's early failures to identify the Sea Tiger strategy behind forming of a deadly Sea Tiger fleet and the international shipping network is a clear example. Unwillingness to accept the fact that LTTE received their arms and ammunition via the sea routes is yet another major component which contributed the strategic failures.

Tactical Drawbacks of the SLN can be traced back to the very inception of the Sea Tigers. The LTTE initially started to move across the Palk Strait to ferry cadres and leaders between Tamil Nadu and to conduct illegal trafficking of arms and contrabands disguised as fishermen. Sea Tigers were better equipped with craft that could outrun the SLN fleet units. This can be seen as another setback. Many minor incidents were treated as separate incidents without mapping them to the much broader picture with a timely collaboration of a much needed naval strategy. Development of the international shipping network is another area where the tactical attention was not rightly mapped to the overall strategy. Tactical innovations which came as suicide boats, innovative weapons,

underwater divers, improvised explosive devices, communication usage, electronic sensors, innovative boat hull designs, disguising the identity of LTTE merchant ships etc. are some of the key features which took the Sea Tigers to a level where the SLN fleet faced element of astonishment in almost all of the encounters made out at sea.

VIII. TURNING THE TIDE IN FAVOUR OF SLN

Learning through the past drawbacks and the usefulness of concepts and theories of naval warfare, such as Asymmetric Warfare, Sea Control, Operational Art and Games Theory, SLN began changing the course they were steering for the last three odd decades. Understanding the requirement of the unconventional approach in dealing with Sea Tigers, the navy utilized some of the outstanding unconventional methods in taking the much wanted complete Sea Control through effective sea denial to the enemy.

All the LTTE military success on land was attributed to the continuous supply ability via the sea routes. Even though this fact was realized, there was no political will or military directive to address the issue as a whole at the early stages. The need to change this approach was rightly identified by the political leadership end 2005. This remains as one of the main reasons behind the success of the navy as well as the whole military. Military received the much needed political will that came at the right time. With this came the naval leadership that steered the navy to victory. Decision making, willingness to take challenges and risks were seen as some important leadership attributes that encouraged and motivated men to fight.

One of the key factors that changed the CoG of the whole war was the destruction of the LTTE floating warehouses at a critical time of the conflict. The destruction as cited by many remains as the pivotal point of the conflict as it contributed in severing the LTTE's umbilical cord. SLN used its conventional fleet to engage enemy floating warehouses operated in the deep Blue Waters. Even though the ships that were used for these deep sea operations were designed for Blue Water missions, the abilities of these vessels were never tested by SLN before. This was the first such mission ever to be undertaken by the navy in its history. The destruction of ten LTTE logistics ships in successive intervals made the LTTE militarily starved. The army

faced less resistance day by day due to this very fact and LTTE had no way what so ever to bring their crucial supplies from sea routes.

Lack of reliable intelligence and information was sighted as another main reason which failed the navy on number of occasions. The difficulty of locating a ship in the open sea without valid information and intelligence understandably became a hindrance to naval operations. SLN adopted a unique ways of gathering crucial information pertaining to Sea Tiger operations by effectively developing a dedicated fishing fleet with sensors and communication facilities. With an expanded fishing fleet operating in the Sri Lankan EEZ as well in high seas, navy had considerable number of eyes and ears out at sea to provide real time information. This made the naval fleet expanded to a greater range. In addition to this initiative, navy developed its intelligence unit to gather real time intelligence through key international partners.

As key decisions were taken by the naval leadership and senior officers at the navy headquarters, availability of the complete battle picture was of paramount importance. Never in the history of SLN operations navy had the luxury of having the complete tactical picture of the maritime domain to take much important strategic and tactical decisions. Navy was successful in making available the much important complete tactical picture by integrating important sensors. This assisted the naval leadership to have a better awareness of the situation and take the most suitable decision.

Understanding the importance of protecting some key economic centres like the Colombo harbour, navy went to the extent of dominating a 30km coastal belt surrounding the harbour periphery. This prevented Sea Tigers from launching their attacks from shore areas closer to the port. This hindered the element of surprise of Sea Tiger attacks as they had to sail long distance which resulted in compromising the secrecy of operations. The coastal domination was not only limited to personnel, but had number of Radars and thermal sensors covering the crucial shorelines. This made SLN aware of the slightest movement of Sea Tigers.

Research and development (R&D) of the navy took a decisive turn in the face of changing Sea Tiger tactics. As the country could not offer purchasing

advanced sensors and weaponry, SLN proved that its R & D initiatives are some of the most advanced and suited applications in the complex asymmetric warfare. Upgrading/modification/ installation of weapons on unimaginable naval platforms, installation of land based weapons on naval craft, upgrading of thermal sensors, construction of unique small boats etc. are some of the significant R&D efforts that made the SLN outstanding against Sea Tigers.

The navy at the crucial time identified the importance of counter challenging the Sea Tigers with the same tactics they used. Navy's innovative thinking came as a unique concept in the field of low intensity maritime warfare with the introduction of the RABS concept. This concept took the Sea Tigers with total surprise in almost all the sea confrontation during the last phase of the conflict. Navy RABS squadron outnumbered the Sea Tigers with arrow boats that are similar in size and shape of LTTE craft. These arrow boats could easily outmanoeuvre the Sea Tiger boat due to speed. These craft were also fitted with long range weapons, thermal sensors and Radars which in way is a marvel in terms of designing such a small craft to be a lethal weapon out at sea.

Sea Tigers mounted number of attacks on naval convoys which proceeded with low speed for days in the critical sea areas carrying military essentials and troops to North. This was a huge burden on the whole of naval operations as all the naval platforms were deployed for convoy escort, hindering many other operational tasks. The decision to acquire a vessel with higher capacity and speed (Jet Liner), made a huge impact in keeping the strategically important connectivity between North and East.

At the final stage of the humanitarian operation, the navy placed a unique layered defence using all its naval platforms. This unique layered defence deployment ensured defence in depth and sealed the seas off the north-eastern seas disabling any LTTE craft to leave the shores or to enter from deep seas. This layered defence is unique in number of ways as it continued till the end of the war round the clock. This remains as only such unique tactical deployment ever to be launched in the history of asymmetric maritime warfare.

The other most important aspect which changed the tide in favour of the navy was the employment of some of the unique tactics and counter tactics by

the naval personnel who were on board the fighting craft. The study of such tactics itself leads to a separate research. Unique manoeuvres used to evade Sea Tiger suicide threat, counter swarming tactics, breaking strong Sea Tiger clusters, exceptional battle formations, firing disciplines etc. are few areas where unconventional approaches of naval warfare was amply demonstrated.

The combination of all the above factors made the tide turn in favour of the navy in almost all the confrontations and was able to maintain the battle rhythm and tempo till the very last moment.

XI. CONCLUSION

A Navy that was traditional and conventional in nature evolved significantly over the years to defeat one of the most advanced terrorist outfits in the world. SLN took time to realize that the traditional naval approach is not a match in the battle against LTTE Sea Tigers. The enemy outmanoeuvred the navy by exploiting key weakness areas strategically and tactically. Sea Tigers took the advantage of the situation which prevailed in the early stages and caused considerable damage to navy's fleet. Tactics introduced by the Sea Tigers were unique in every form and found to be real time application of asymmetric warfare concepts. Navy primarily evolved around the Sea Tigers by way of reactive response strategy. The rigidity of the conventional naval setup held back the Navy for a considerable time period. Even though the asymmetric advantage is known world around to favour the weaker opponent, SLN through hard learned lessons identified that these same tactics can be effectively used against Sea Tigers.

SLN adopted the much accepted conventional naval warfare theories and yielded resulted through an unconventional approach. The Sri Lankan case remains as the only success story of a conventional naval force to defeat a fierce enemy by way of unconventional means. Whilst many navies take interest in studying the possibilities of such low-economy yet high-gain warfare, Sri Lanka experienced not the possibility but the reality. The maritime doctrines are eager to address various factors of the unconventional and asymmetrical naval warfare, but the reality lies on one's will to meet the threat, address the threat and finally to become victorious. In this sense, the SLN has introduced a battle proven model for the rest of the

world navies adopt against their future maritime enemies who will be unconventional in tactics and strategies.

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR



Author was the former Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy and the Chairman of the Sri Lanka shipping Corporation. His research interests include maritime terrorism and International relation related fields. He has presented number of academic papers locally and internationally for wide diversity of audiences. He is a distinguished alumnus of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington in India, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Hawaii and Royal College of Defence Studies in the United Kingdom. He is also a Fellow of the Nautical Institute of the United Kingdom and currently the President of the Sri Lanka Chapter. He is presently reading for his Doctorate at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University.