
Sri Lanka's Victory

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A win that vindicates one of the major lessons of September 11: Most of the time, terrorists have to be defeated militarily before political accommodation is possible. The war on terror scored a big victory this weekend with the Sri Lankan army's battlefield defeat of the terrorist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The event ends one of the world's longest running civil wars. It also vindicates one of the major lessons of September 11: Most of the time, terrorists have to be defeated militarily before political accommodation is possible.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced yesterday that the army had routed the Tigers from their last redoubt in the island's Northern Province, killing Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and several hundred other top militant leaders too. Prabhakaran's apparent demise is the Sri Lankan equivalent to killing Osama bin Laden. Now that the Tiger leadership has been eliminated, it's much less likely the cadres will continue a low-level terrorist insurgency. The story of how Sri Lanka got here is worth recounting. The island's conflict had political roots when it started in 1983. After Sri Lanka's independence from Britain, the ethnic Sinhalese majority pursued many discriminatory policies against the Tamil minority: a Sinhala-only language policy, preferences for Sinhalese in university admissions and government hiring, and the exclusion of Tamils from the police, to name a few. But the war quickly became more about Prabhakaran's determination to form an independent Tamil state under the exclusive control of his Marxist Tigers than about those Tamil grievances. His troops spent the early part of the war fighting and eliminating competing Tamil militant groups as often as they fought the government. The Tigers also killed many moderate Tamil politicians who would have been willing to cooperate politically with Colombo. Along the way Prabhakaran made extensive use of suicide bombers -- including a teenage girl who blew herself up to assassinate former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 -- and relied heavily on child soldiers. In the final months of the war he used Tamil civilians as human shields. Sri Lanka's conflict has claimed 70,000 lives by most counts. It should have been clear early on that government negotiation would go nowhere with such a committed killer. But successive governments engaged in talks with the Tigers, and periodic government ceasefires and negotiations gave the terrorists opportunities to regroup. For instance, the Tigers built an "Air Force" of propeller-driven planes and used it to attack government bases during the ceasefire that technically was in effect from 2002 to 2008. Mr. Rajapaksa, elected in 2005, finally put an end to the "peace process" with Prabhakaran and focused on winning the military fight. In 2007, with the help of a Tiger splinter group, the government subdued the Eastern Province; the first elections were held there last year. The fighting then moved to the North. It has not been cheap or easy. Military spending in the 2009 budget is \$1.7 billion, 5% of GDP and 20% of the government's budget. Colombo also learned lessons from its earlier failures against the Tigers. The military improved its training in counterinsurgency tactics, and Colombo invested the resources to enable the army to hold territory it won. Moves by the United States, Britain, Canada and other countries to freeze Tiger fundraising among the Tamil diaspora helped weaken the Tigers. Mr. Rajapaksa wisely ignored international calls for a ceasefire as he got closer to victory, including threats from the Obama Administration to block \$1.9 billion in International Monetary Fund aid money. Serious problems remain. The government now faces a potential humanitarian crisis in housing, feeding and clothing the more than 200,000 Tamil civilians who have fled the fighting. Over the longer term Colombo will have to more fully address the political grievances of moderate Tamils and ensure that there are economic opportunities for all Sri Lankans. After decades of socialism, several rounds of liberalization have since paved the way for 6% to 8% annual growth even amid a civil war. But with the tourism, garment and tea industries all suffering in the global slowdown, Colombo must institute more reforms, like tariff cuts, to spur further growth. As Colombo starts to grapple with those post-conflict problems, everyone else can take note: Thanks to a strategy of defeating the insurgency, Sri Lanka is now in a position to talk seriously about peace and economic growth. When negotiating with terrorists doesn't work, beating them does. Courtesy: online.wsj.com