

## GEOGRAFIE A STRATEGIE POVSTALCŮ NA SRÍ LANCE A FILIPÍNÁCH

### GEOGRAPHY AND INSURGENT STRATEGY IN SRI LANKA AND THE PHILIPPINES

*Mgr. Tomáš Lalkovič<sup>a</sup>*

#### **Abstrakt**

Článek analyzuje vliv geografie na strategie povstaleckých skupin na Srí Lance a na Filipínách. Používá konceptualizaci geografie vytvořenou Davidem Galulou a zkoumá vliv osmi rozličných geografických kategorií na strategii Tygrů osvobození tamilského ílamu a Fronty islámského osvobození Morů. Výsledky analýzy ukazují, že v případě LTTE měly geografické podmínky ostrova silný pozitivní vliv na vojenské úspěchy skupiny, zatímco na Filipínách měla geografie tříštivý účinek a výrazně přispěla k selhání osvobozeneckého hnutí Morů.

#### **Abstract**

The article analyses the influence of geography on the strategy of insurgent groups in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. It uses the conceptualization of geography created by David Galula to examine the influence of 8 distinct categories of geography on the strategy of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The analysis shows that while the geography of Sri Lanka was a driving force that enabled many of the LTTE successes, it had a divisive effect in the Philippines and heavily contributed to the military failures of the Moro independence movement.

#### **Klíčová slova**

Povstání, geografie, strategie, terorismus, terén, populace, Srí Lanka, Filipíny.

#### **Keywords**

Insurgency, geography, strategy, terrorism, terrain, population, Sri Lanka, Philippines.

---

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Brno, Czech Republic. E-mail: [t.lalkovic@gmail.com](mailto:t.lalkovic@gmail.com). [AAD-1030-2022. 0000-0002-1519-7382](https://doi.org/10.3849/1802-7199.22.2022.0000-0002-1519-7382).

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent decades, conventional forces of many developed nations were met by an opponent who could be described in various terms as an insurgent, irregular, paramilitary, criminal, or terrorist force. Regardless of the circumstances, we can certainly expect that insurgencies will continue to be an integral part of modern warfare for the foreseeable future. However, not every country is equally suited to host a successful insurgency. An array of social, economic, and geographic conditions influences the possible break-out and outcome of an insurgency. These include economic prosperity, historic grievances, ethnic diversity, military material and expertise, safe haven, or a general weakness of the government.

Out of these conditions it is perhaps geography which has received less attention than it deserves, in the light of “hearts and minds” counterinsurgency strategies. To negate the overwhelming power of developed armies, insurgents often use geography to even the odds. Depending on the environment, these actors might choose unexpected and unique solutions to create asymmetry, avoid detection or negate the technological advantage of their opponent. The understanding and anticipation of these strategies is the necessary first step for countering them.

The conditions of geography that are permissible for a successful insurgency to arise were neatly summarised by David Galula in his 1964 manual. The presented paper aims to examine these conditions in practice on the example of two South-Asian insurgent groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil-Eelam (LTTE) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The wars these insurgent groups waged share many similarities, for example, their post-colonial history, goals, motivation, and the status of the ethnic groups they claimed to represent. However, the military strategy of the LTTE was much more ruthless and effective than that of the MILF. The insurgencies also had different outcomes. While the LTTE was defeated in 2009, the MILF instead abandoned its demand for independence and settled for regional autonomy.

This paper will argue that the differences between the strategies of the two groups have their basis in geography. Even though geostrategic analysis alone cannot explain the choice of strategy and there are certainly more factors at play, the study of terrain, climate, population, and economy can still provide insight into available strategies, strengths, and vulnerabilities. The first section will examine the interactions between geography and insurgent strategy in general and introduce the specific elements of geography that will be relevant in the case studies. The second section will analyse the influence of geography on the strategy of the two insurgent groups and briefly compare them in the conclusion.

## METHODOLOGY

The presented work attempts to answer how geography influences the strategy of insurgents. It uses the framework created by David Galula that separates the concept of geography into its individual constituents (location, size, configuration, borders, terrain, climate, population, and economy). The problem of applying this framework to the research question is that Galula did not discuss the influence of geography on strategy, but rather the prerequisites for a successful insurgency. Secondly, there is the

problem of interpretation, as the whole chapter on geography in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* is only two pages long and the geographic elements are not closely examined. Clarification of Galula's ideas was therefore sought in historical examples and the works of other writers, such as T. E. Lawrence or Mao Zedong.

The theory was then used to analyse the influence of geography in the case of two insurgent groups, the LTTE and the MILF. The choice of cases was mostly arbitrary but based on the most-similar logic. Both insurgent groups operated in similar environment at the same time and had identical goals. However, the insurgencies had different outcomes, the LTTE was defeated militarily, while the MILF reached a compromise. The hypothesis is that different outcomes can be at least partly explained by geography. Alternative explanations will be explored in the conclusion.

## GEOGRAPHY

As General Smith<sup>1</sup> says in *The Utility of Force*, "history is the context of the battle, whilst geography is the context of the battlefield." We can understand history to be the driving force behind the cause of the conflict and geography driving tactics. However, the influence of geography goes beyond tactics to the level of strategy. An analysis of geographic conditions may be able to explain choices behind the insurgent strategy. Using an analysis that neglects history, psychology, and economy to predict future behaviour of insurgents would certainly be problematic, but the ambition of this work is not to discard them, but merely to accurately describe the impact of the geographic component in strategy.

Geography is defined as "the study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and of human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities."<sup>2</sup> Physical geography studies the physical properties of the earth, processes, and patterns in the natural environment, while human geography deals with human activities in and interactions with the natural environment.

Using the definition above, the geographic factors that influence insurgent strategy certainly include climate and terrain, but also the position of major population and industrial centres and distribution of relevant ethnic groups. A summary of geographic conditions and their influence on insurgencies was developed by David Galula in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. These are:

- Location
- Size
- Configuration
- International borders
- Terrain
- Climate
- Population

---

<sup>1</sup> SMITH, Rupert. *The Utility of Force*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0307265623.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 0199571120.

- Economy<sup>3</sup>

Location of the country is used by Galula mainly as a measure of permeability of its borders. In general, “a country isolated by natural barriers or situated among countries that oppose the insurgency is favourable to the counterinsurgent.”<sup>4</sup> It is easy to imagine the Vietnam War having a completely different outcome if the borders of South Vietnam with its hostile northern neighbour were not extremely long and hard to police. It is expected that insurgents in a country with open borders and hostile neighbours will seek outside support, or at least sanctuary as a part of their strategy.

Size reflects the total area of the country that the government must control to stifle the insurgency. “*The larger the country, the more difficult for a government to control it.*”<sup>5</sup> We can reasonably expect larger countries to provide more safe havens and more opportunities for the insurgents to evade the state police and armed forces. A famous example is the Long March undertaken by the Communist Red Army in China, under the command of Mao Zedong. This strategic retreat over more than 9,000 km allowed the Red Army to avoid defeat, recuperate and eventually resume the fight. Another well-known example of distance working in favour of the insurgent is the Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire, led by T.E. Lawrence.

Configuration refers to the general shape and dimensions of the country on the map. The easier it is to divide the country into separate districts with controlled access, the harder it will be for insurgents to evade the authorities. The ideal case is a country divided into individual districts with airtight borders and the only way in or out being through controlled checkpoints. This prevents the flow of troops, supplies, and information among the insurgent cells, severely crippling their capabilities. A large, roughly circular country such as China would be much harder to compartmentalize than for example the Philippines, which are already compartmentalized naturally by their virtue of being an archipelago.

The example above also illustrates the influence of international borders on the insurgency. Their length, proportion of coastal to inland borders, and the attitude of the neighbouring country towards the insurgents all have major impact. “*A high proportion of coastline to inland borders helps the counterinsurgent because maritime traffic can be controlled with a limited amount of technical means, which the counterinsurgent possesses or is usually able to acquire.*”<sup>6</sup>

Mountains, swamps and vegetation, or otherwise rough and obscuring terrain also benefits the insurgent. Government forces are generally the side with greater resources and technical means, such as air and satellite surveillance, long-range weapons, and armoured vehicles. Difficult terrain limits the usefulness of surveillance and advanced weapons and partially negates the technological advantage of the counterinsurgent. One type of obscuring terrain that Galula does not mention is urban. The city does not necessarily limit the offensive power of advanced weapons, but it does limit the willingness of political and military leaders to use them. The destructive power of

---

<sup>3</sup> GALULA, David. *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0275993030.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

modern weapons in a constricted environment and the collateral damage they produce can be leveraged by the insurgents in their campaign for public support.

Contrary to the effects of terrain, harsh climate may be beneficial to the counterinsurgent due to the better state of their material supplies and logistics. “The rainy season in Indochina hampered the Vietminh more than it did the French. Winter in Algeria brought FLN activity to almost a standstill. Merely to keep scarce weapons and ammunition in good condition when one lives continuously in the open, as the guerrilla does, is a perpetual headache.”<sup>7</sup> The insurgent’s need for reliable logistics is exemplified by the FARC’s spending a considerable fraction of their budget on the construction of a road network in the Colombian jungle.<sup>8</sup> However, harsh climate should not be automatically considered beneficial to the counterinsurgent as the advantage they can gain from it is ultimately dependent on the context of the conflict. Finally, the insurgents can also offset bad logistics by looting arms and supplies from the enemy. As Mao once said: “*We have a claim on the output of the arsenals of London as well as of Hanyang, and what is more, it is to be delivered to us by the enemy’s own transport corps.*”<sup>9</sup>

We can separate the study of geography into physical and human. While the previous elements were all connected to physical geography, the final pair are population and economy. In the case of the population, what matters is not as much its absolute size as its density and distribution. Secondly, the distribution of the ethnic or religious minority which the insurgent claims to represent will be a major determinant of strategy. For example, during the Malayan Emergency, most of the communist guerrillas were ethnically Chinese, rural farmers. The insurgency therefore gained very little traction in the cities but flourished in the countryside and especially in the Chinese-settled areas. One of the greatest successes of the British counterinsurgent forces was the resettling of the Chinese farmers in villages with controlled access and the issuing of identification cards. By isolating the guerrillas from their support base and later marginalizing their goals by granting Malaya its independence, the insurgency lost all the means and reasons to continue.

Lastly, economies may be vulnerable to certain shocks, depending on their composition and the level of development. While highly developed countries may be vulnerable to short and intense waves of terrorism, they may also be more capable of adapting or protecting their sources of revenue in the long run. Countries reliant on primary resource exports or on tourism may be especially vulnerable to violence and the destruction of their infrastructure. On the other hand, an underdeveloped country may be less vulnerable to terrorism but much more open to guerrilla warfare. Economic interests of the insurgent leadership can also influence the behaviour of the whole group.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> OTERO-BAHAMON, Silvia - URIBE, Simón - PENARANDA-CURRIE, Isabel. Seeing like a Guerrilla: the logic of infrastructure in the building of insurgent orders. *Geoforum* [on-line]. 2021 [cit. 2022-05-11]. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718521002785>

<sup>9</sup> ZEDONG, Mao. *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Washington, DC: U.S. Marine Corps, 1989.

## LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM

The first case study will analyse the influence of geography on the strategy of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The LTTE fielded one of the most capable insurgent armies and probably the only insurgent army that operated its own air force and navy and utilized them in combined operations. *“The group demonstrated a proven ability to operate along a full combat spectrum, including selective assassinations through acts of urban sabotage, civilian-directed bombings, hit and run attacks, and full-scale frontal assaults.”*<sup>10</sup>

### Location

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, barely touching the south-eastern coast of India. The shortest distance between India and Sri Lanka is roughly 30 km. As for its size, it is approximately 65,000 km<sup>2</sup> large, making it one of the largest islands in the world.<sup>11</sup>

*“It occupies a strategic location near major Indian Ocean sea lanes and is connected to the south-eastern coast of India by a submerged limestone shoal. Geological evidence suggests that this 50-km long bridge once connected India and Sri Lanka, ancient records seem to indicate that a foot passage was possible between the two land masses until the 15th century when the land bridge broke up in a cyclone.”*<sup>12</sup>

The influence of location is most obvious in the LTTE’s utilization of naval forces. Even though Galula argues that island-bound insurgencies are easier to isolate, the proximity of the Indian province Tamil Nadu meant that the LTTE placed incredible value on its ability to contest the waters of Sri Lanka and keep the flow of supplies and recruits intact. An independent naval wing of the LTTE, the Sea Tigers, was created in 1984.<sup>13</sup> Prabhakaran realised the importance of the naval dimension of the conflict, claiming that:

*“geographically the security of Tamil Eelam is interlinked with that of the seas. Only when we are strong in the seas and break the dominance our enemy now has that we will be able to retain the land areas we liberated and drive our enemies from our homeland.”*<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> DUNIGAN, Molly - HOFFMAN, Dick - CHALK, Peter - NICHIPORUK, Brian - DELUCA, Paul. *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications of Maritime Irregular Warfare*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8330-5891-1.

<sup>11</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *Sri Lanka: The World Factbook* [on-line]. 2022 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/#geography>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> DUNIGAN et al., ref. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

The spectrum of operations that Sea Tigers conducted included naval and amphibious combat, logistics, arms trafficking by oceanic merchant ships, underwater demolitions, suicide bombings, intelligence, and surveillance. The Sea Tigers also had a dedicated Marine Engineering and Boat Building Section, and a Maritime School and Academy. The ships used for combat operations were generally home-made fibreglass vessels, built in improvised workshops and armed with machine guns, RPGs, and explosives.<sup>15</sup>

The role of Sea Tigers in the overall strategy of the LTTE was to reduce the mobility of the Sri Lankan Navy around the north-eastern coast.<sup>16</sup> By constraining the freedom of movement of the Sri Lankan Navy, the LTTE could protect and support its ground operations, cut off the maritime logistics routes of the SLAF, and even more importantly, smuggle supplies from the rest of the world, a vital task for sustaining the insurgency. Favourably to the LTTE, *“the Palk Strait is actually unsuitable for operation of the heavier sea vessels of the SLN and the Indian Navy which tried to establish a blockade and police this region.”*<sup>17</sup>

Aside from direct combat on sea, the pressure on Sri Lankan Navy was increased by using home-made sea mines and suicide attacks. *“The engineers of the Sea Tigers built floating mines that were used in Trincomalee harbour and off the Sri Lankan coast to hinder SLN operations and damage the Sri Lankan maritime commerce.”*<sup>18</sup> The suicide attacks were generally carried out by groups of two or three volunteers in specifically designed ships. Between 1990 and 2008, more than 40 suicide missions were carried out by the Sea Tigers, 80% of which were deemed successful.<sup>19</sup> Their psychological effect created an observable dent in the recruitment numbers for the Sri Lankan Navy in the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> During the 1990s, the Sea Lions managed to kill between one third and a half of all Sri Lankan Navy combatants, severely decreasing its morale and capabilities, gaining the control of the seas around the northern part of the island and the city of Jaffna.<sup>21</sup>

### Size and configuration

Sri Lanka is 437 kilometres long from north to south and 225 kilometres wide east to west at its broadest points.<sup>22</sup> The island is roughly oval shaped and lacks any natural barriers, making it especially hard to compartmentalize. Mountains are only present in the south-central part and the elevation flattens out nearer to the coast. *“Most of the island’s surface consists of plains between 30 and 200 meters above sea level. A coastal belt about thirty meters above sea level surrounds the island.”*<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> POVLOCK, Paul. A Guerrilla War at Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War. *Small Wars Journal* [on-line]. 2011 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a549049.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> DUNIGAN et al., ref. 10.

<sup>17</sup> GATES, Scott - KAUSHIK, Roy. *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. ISBN: 9781138252981.

<sup>18</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> DUNIGAN et al., ref. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> GATES - KAUSHIK, ref. 17, p. 175.

<sup>23</sup> ROSS, Russel - SAVADA, Andrea - NYROP, Richard. *Sri Lanka: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990. ISBN-10: 0160240557.

The only part of the island that is divided from the rest by a natural barrier is the Jaffna peninsula in the north. The Elephant Pass is the only point where the Jaffna peninsula touches the mainland. Its occupation paired with the control of the neighbouring seas would allow the insurgents to safely hold the whole Jaffna peninsula. Controlling their own safe haven and having a territory to fall back on allowed the LTTE to pass from a campaign of subversion to conventional war. Without the control of the pass, the LTTE could never hope to pursue their ultimate political ambition of free Tamil homeland. The strategic value of the Elephant Pass is emphasised by the number of battles waged for it during the war.

The First Battle of Elephant Pass took place on 10 July 1990. The LTTE managed to surround the military base that occupied the pass, cutting off the possibility of reinforcement and installing several anti-aircraft guns to prevent resupply via helicopter.<sup>24</sup>

*“The fall of Elephant Pass would be disastrous, both militarily and politically. The loss of such a strategically important base would entail the loss of territorial sovereignty of the northern region. It would mean a severe blow to the Government’s cherished military strategy of taking control of Tamil areas from the Tigers. It would also be a political disaster to Premadasa’s regime.”<sup>25</sup>*

Despite the LTTE assaults that included the use of improvised armoured vehicles, the SLAF managed to hold out. However, in April 2000, during the Second Battle of Elephant Pass, the base and the isthmus came under the control of the LTTE in a humiliating defeat for the government. It remained in the hands of LTTE until the very end of the war and only was recaptured in 2009, during the final mopping-up operations of the SLAF.<sup>26</sup>

As for the influence of size, a small country should favour the counterinsurgent, making it easier to police. In the case of the LTTE however, mastery of the sea and the control of the Elephant Pass negated this advantage. On the other hand, configuration of the island determined one of the major objectives of the LTTE: the control of the Jaffna Peninsula. But the configuration of the peninsula on its own would be irrelevant if not for the presence of Tamil population in the north of the island and the proximity of the Indian province of Tamil Nadu.

### International borders

Being an island, Sri Lanka does not share borders with any other country. This would normally help isolate the insurgency and benefit the counterinsurgent. However, *“the northernmost tip of Jaffna is only 22 nautical miles from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and the journey takes about one hour by boat.”<sup>27</sup>* The LTTE quickly recognised

---

<sup>24</sup> RAJASINGHAM. Sri Lanka: The Untold Story. *Asia Times Online* [on-line]. 2002 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://sangam.org/sri-lankathe-untold-story-chapter-1/>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> FAIR, Christine. *Urban Battle Fields of South Asia: Lessons Learned from Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004. ISBN: 0-8330-3682-3, p.39.

the potential of this connection and established the first ties in the 1970s. From the 1980s onward, the LTTE set up a few training camps in the province without the acknowledgment of the Indian government. The official support for the LTTE came not long after, in 1983, but lasted only until 1987. At the beginning, the Indian government decided to support the Tamil independence movement partly to placate its own Tamil population and partly because of its own ambitions of controlling Sri Lanka. But India soon realized that the Tamil ambitions of independence could easily spread to its own Tamil population and the policy of support turned to intervention, first a peacekeeping mission around Jaffna and then active operations against the LTTE.<sup>28</sup> However, in the few years in between, India's foreign intelligence Research and Analysis Wing set up at least "32 training camps in Tamil Nadu, and some 20,000 Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents were receiving sanctuary, financial support, training, and weapons."<sup>29</sup> Some of the training even took place in India's own military and paramilitary training camps and prestigious military academies.

The proximity to Indian Tamils therefore allowed the LTTE to capitalize on this physical and cultural connection as well as the political influence of Tamils in India. The open character of Sri Lankan borders and the failure of Sri Lankan Navy to secure them also allowed for procurement and shipping of weapons and exchange of experience with other insurgent and terrorist groups. However, even though the contact with global criminal underworld is an outcome of geography, it is of small consequence to the overall LTTE strategy. Whether the LTTE would otherwise have enough resources to wage war against the Sri Lankan government on the scale that it did is, however, an interesting question. Povlock<sup>30</sup> suggests that the demise of LTTE came after its leader Prabhakaran decided to defend the territory LTTE gathered up to 2007 in a conventional fashion. This extremely exhausted the ranks of capable fighters, together with their supplies and weapons. But the main problem was that at the time the sea shipping lanes of the LTTE were already intercepted by the Sri Lankan Navy and its merchant fleet destroyed.

### Terrain and climate

Sri Lanka can be divided into three distinct elevation zones, the central highlands, the plains, and the coastal belt, and two vegetation zones, wet and dry. The mountains and the south-western part of the country receive the most rainfall and comprise the wet zone. Most of the south-eastern, eastern, and northern parts are the so-called dry zone.<sup>31</sup> The typical vegetation of the dry zone is a scrub forest, replaced by scrub bushes and cactuses in the driest areas.<sup>32</sup> It is these parts in the northern half of the island that the insurgency was most active in. However, the LTTE was not contained only to the countryside but also fought major battles in urban environment. We can therefore identify three distinct types of terrain which the LTTE operated in: coastal plains, jungles and forests in the interior, and cities.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15.

<sup>31</sup> ROSS - SAVADA - NYROP, ref. 23, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

Aside from transporting supplies and denial operations aimed at the Sri Lankan Navy, the Sea Tigers proved extremely useful during joint operations on the island's coasts. An amphibious attack during one of the struggles for the Elephant Pass in 1995 caused over a thousand Sri Lankan Army casualties.<sup>33</sup> A similar combined assault in 1996 resulted in the capture of an isolated base in the east of the island at Mulaitivu and another 1600 casualties.<sup>34</sup> The LTTE proved that they were able to conduct large-scale, coordinated, conventional operations when required. Whether this is a consequence of the terrain is questionable. As an insurgent group, the LTTE had to pick its battles carefully, resorting to conventional war only when the target was highly valuable or vulnerable, as in the cases of the Elephant Pass and Mulaitivu. In such cases, however, the LTTE was able to exploit the advantage offered by its control of the seas in coastal areas.

At other times, the LTTE resorted to hit and run attacks, for example, in the later phases of the IPKF mission, after being pushed out of Jaffna. Small unit actions regularly took place in the north and east of Sri Lanka at the time. The insurgents would typically assault supply trucks, patrols, or isolated posts, destroy bridges and mine roads, before retreating into the forest, where thick vegetation offered excellent concealment.<sup>35</sup> In general, during this phase of the IPKF mission:

*“activity shifted from the urban areas of Jaffna to the jungles of the rural areas depending upon the relative strengths of the combatants. Low level violence and political subversion would be emphasized until the insurgent forces could regenerate combat power.”<sup>36</sup>*

The insurgents would always be on the move, conducting ambushes and harassing the government forces. Their activity would come in waves, first expending a lot of manpower and resources in a fast offensive, and then relenting to recuperate and allow government forces to let their guard down. In periods of success, the guerrilla operations would transform into conventional war. When that became unsustainable due to casualties and exhaustion, the conventional army would again disperse into the jungle.

The LTTE were also active in urban environment using their terrorist wing, the Black Tigers (and their naval counterpart, the Sea Black Tigers), an elite unit of highly trained and indoctrinated suicide bombers. *“The LTTE is the only group that has successfully assassinated two heads of state, several presidential candidates, and five cabinet ministers as well as numerous other political, governmental, military, and security force personnel.”<sup>37</sup>* Other than that, the Black Tigers also targeted the Joint Operations Command, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the Colombo World Trade Center, religious symbols, and oil storage facilities in Kolonnawa.<sup>38</sup> As for the impact on the economy, the 2001 Colombo airport bombing might serve as an example, which *“devastated the civilian tourist industry, causing a 90% reduction in tourism in the succeeding*

---

<sup>33</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> GATES - KAUSHIK, ref. 17.

<sup>36</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> FAIR, ref. 27, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

months.”<sup>39</sup> Suicide bombings were also often used as a precursor to conventional assaults on fortified targets, causing confusion and preparing the way for other fighters. Civilians were apparently not a target. Kulandaswamy<sup>40</sup> argues that there had been a great amount of indifference to the insurgency among Sri Lankan population, in the sense that the whole problem was quite disconnected from daily issues of common citizens. The analysis by Fair suggests that the strategic implications of suicide attacks were threefold: to entangle the Sri Lankan security forces in the south, intimidate politicians, and dissuade the public from openly challenging the LTTE.

As for the influence of climate on the overall strategy of the LTTE, there is little evidence that it had any noticeable impact. The climate of the island is tropical and humid, but most of the rainfall occurs in the central highlands, which the insurgency did not reach. Seasonal rains make it hard to cross the rivers but again, most of them flow from the central highlands to the sea. The LTTE was impressively well-equipped and financed and there are no mentions that it would either struggle to maintain its equipment as Galula would predict or had to adapt its strategy to the climate. On the other hand, even though the climate did not have a direct impact on the insurgent strategy, a major blow to the insurgency was struck by a tsunami on 26 December 2004.<sup>41</sup> The tsunami heavily damaged the areas in the north and east of the island, killing thousands of insurgents of the Sea Tigers naval wing and destroying hundreds of their boats. The LTTE could never fully recover from these losses.

### Population and economy

The distribution of the Tamil population in the north of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Nadu province determined that the Jaffna peninsula would be crucial to the LTTE’s interests. Although the Tamils were concentrated in the city of Jaffna, most of the Sri Lankan population was rural at the time of the war, the 2009 value for urbanization is only 18.24%.<sup>42</sup> The LTTE relied on this rural population for financial support, provisions, recruits, non-combatant helpers, and intelligence. In desperate moments, the LTTE went as far as to use people as human shields, women and child soldiers, and exploited civilian casualties in their propaganda.<sup>43</sup>

### Summary

The LTTE repeatedly proved to be one of the most capable insurgent groups in history. They were able to fully exploit the opportunities that the geography of Sri Lanka provided. The LTTE fought a guerrilla war in the jungle, denied the Sri Lankan fleet the control of the sea, conducted amphibious operations on the coastal plains and targeted major government institutions with terror attacks in Colombo and other major cities. The group also managed to transition from guerrilla to conventional operations when

---

<sup>39</sup> POVLOCK, ref. 15, p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> KULANDASWAMY, M. S. *Sri Lankan Crisis: Anatomy of Ethnicity, Peace, and Security*. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2002. ISBN-13: 9788172730338.

<sup>41</sup> HULL, Bryson - TARRANT, Bill. Tale of War and Peace in the 2004 Tsunami. *Reuters* [on-line]. 2009 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://reut.rs/35e14LY>

<sup>42</sup> O’NEILL, Aaron. Sri Lanka: Urbanization from 2009 to 2019. *Statista.com* [on-line]. 2021 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3JG96MD>

<sup>43</sup> POVLOCK, ref.15, p. 41.

the circumstances required it, for example in the battles for the Elephant Pass, which the LTTE held for almost a decade.

However, geography on its own did not dictate the choice of strategy. Geography of Sri Lanka merely created opportunities, the Tamil separatist movement was able to exploit them because of their resources and unity. The LTTE managed to absorb or destroy most of its competition very early and therefore became the sole beneficiary of all international aid and the only destination for Tamil recruits. In contrast, competition for resources and a conflict of interests played a major role in the Moro insurgency in the Philippines, which will be examined in the second case study.

## MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT

The second case study will examine the influence of geography on the strategy of a Philippine insurgent group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Various violent non-state actors sprung up since the beginning of the hostilities in the 1960s and 1970s, including nationalist groups, religious fundamentalists, and bandits. The MILF proved to be generally the most successful and powerful among them.

### Location

The Philippine archipelago lies in Southeast Asia in a unique position that made it a crossroad of various civilizations, religions, and cultures over the course of history, which gave rise to the Filipino people, who now inhabit it.<sup>44</sup>

*“The Philippines occupy an area that stretches for 1,850 kilometres from about the fifth to the twentieth parallels north latitude. The total land area is almost 300,000 square kilometres. Only approximately 1,000 of its 7,200 islands are populated, and fewer than one-half of these are larger than 2.5 square kilometres. Eleven islands make up 94 % of the Philippine landmass, and two of these—Luzon and Mindanao—measure 105,000 and 95,000 square kilometres, respectively.”<sup>45</sup>*

The LTTE case study showed that the proximity to the Indian Tamil Nadu and the configuration of the Jaffna peninsula placed a premium value on naval forces and allowed strong support from across the border. However, the same cannot be said for the MILF. By the time the MILF came to power, Malaysia had already ceased to support the insurgency. Further, naval forces could not be utilized with the same effect as by the LTTE. Even though the location did not forbid the use of a navy, the MILF simply lacked the resources and the incentive to do so. At the time of the government offensive in 2000, when most of the heavy fighting took place, the MILF was largely contained to the interior of Mindanao where it attempted to protect its quasi-state and economic interests (agriculture). Even though the MILF could not challenge the Philippine government on the sea, it maintained a small pirate fleet. *“In 2003, for*

---

<sup>44</sup> DOLAN, Ronald. *Philippines: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. ISBN-13: 978-0844407487.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

example, the MILF was believed to be responsible for 16 out of 155 (actual and attempted) attacks recorded in the Philippines.”<sup>46</sup> However, the pirates rarely attacked larger vessels and mostly confined their activities to fishing boats, barges, and tugs, sometimes raiding smaller coastal towns and villages.

### Size and configuration

Looking at the map of the Philippines, the first apparent attribute is their fragmentation. An insurgency isolated on a single island may be easily contained, but the same job will be immensely more difficult in an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands. In this case, however, the fragmentation of the islands (and diverging interests of its leaders) did the Moro liberation movement more harm than good. Decentralization of control was a necessary compromise that allowed the insurgents to conduct operations over the archipelago, but divergence along economic and ideological lines caused the movement to constantly splinter.

The MILF inherited the decentralized organizational structure and the associated problems from its predecessor. The group had an established Central Committee that acted as the highest executive body for policy and strategic planning. A legislative and judicial branches functioned Under the Central Committee, together with the general staff.<sup>47</sup> The individual theatres of the insurgency were led and governed by provincial committees. However, Bale<sup>48</sup> describes this elaborate organization as loosely knit rather than well structured. The provincial committees acted mainly on their own initiative, carrying out recruitment, training, and combat activities without specific directions from the Central Committee or close interaction with their counterparts in other provinces.

The decentralized structure and physical distance meant that the group was vulnerable to splintering. In 2003, a fringe group of the MILF was involved in an armed clash with the government forces and included some 200 fighters. “MILF has been quick to disassociate itself with the insurgents, saying they were a breakaway faction of the group that has aligned itself with the Abu Sofia bandit group.”<sup>49</sup> This was not an isolated event. In 2011, another faction broke off from the MILF, this time openly challenging the peace efforts of the MILF as a waste of time and claiming to fight a true jihad for the liberation of the Moro homeland.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> LISS, Carolin - BIGGS, Ted (eds.) *Piracy in Southeast Asia. Trends, Hot Spots and Responses*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017. ISBN-13: 978-1138602809, p. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Stanford University. Mapping Militant Organizations: Moro Islamic Liberation Front. CISAC [on-line]. 2019 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at:

<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-islamic-liberation-front>

<sup>48</sup> BALE, Jeffrey. The Abu Sayyaf Group in Its Philippine and International Contexts. *Middlebury Institute of International Studies* [on-line]. No date [cit. 2022-02-20], p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Philippines: Fractionalization Among Mindanao’s Militants. Stratfor [on-line]. 2005 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/philippines-fractionalization-among-mindanaos-militants>

<sup>50</sup> Rogue MILF Commander Forms New Separatist Group. *The Philippine Star* [on-line]. 2011 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2011/08/19/717908/rogue-milf-commander-forms-new-separatist-group>

Decentralized control typically allows insurgents to be faster and more flexible in the type of guerrilla and terror campaigns that the MILF conducted prior to the offensive of 2000. On the other hand, it impedes the effort on the strategic level by violating ceasefires, promoting distrust between the MILF and the government, and hindering political settlement. For a group trying to win its goal with political means as much as military, rogue factions outside of central control are a hindrance, even though they have certain advantages militarily. The alternative explanation is that fragmenting was intentional.

*“MILF could be maintaining clandestine connections to its fringe elements as insurance in case the peace process slows or collapses. However, as offshoot groups form, a lack of central control over MILF’s various factions will accelerate the fractionalization.”<sup>51</sup>*

Pobre and Quilop<sup>52</sup> also view the decentralized control over MILF’s fringe group as a negative rather than an advantage. They list the decentralization as one of the weaknesses of the MILF, claiming that *“the lack of dependable communications equipment and transportation facilities hampered personnel movement, coordination, supervision and control in overextended MILF operational areas,”*<sup>53</sup> making it difficult to reinforce areas under pressure and coordinate in case of emergency. Other factors also suggest that the fragmentation was not intentional and will be discussed in the section on population and economy.

### International borders

Support from outside the borders also played a role in the insurgency, as it did in Sri Lanka. The Moro recruits killed during the Jabidah massacre were being trained for a destabilization operation in the resource-rich Malaysian province of Sabah in the north of Borneo, which the Philippines claim as its own.<sup>54</sup> The Sabah province is some 350 kilometres south-west of the coast of Mindanao and connected to it by a string of islands. The Malaysian government was agitated upon finding out about the operation and in turn started to support the Moro people against the Philippine government.<sup>55</sup> A special office was set up by the local government of Sabah and several recruits were sent there to undergo military training.<sup>56</sup> In the wake of these events, the original Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) was founded, which later splintered into the

---

<sup>51</sup> Stratfor, ref. 49.

<sup>52</sup> POBRE, Cesar - QUILLOP, Raymund (eds.). *In Assertion Of Sovereignty*. Quezon City: Armed Forces of the Philippines - Office of Strategic and Special Studies, 2008. ISBN: 978-971-94342-0-7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> BALE, ref. 48, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> THALANG, Chanintira. Malaysia’s role in two South-East Asian insurgencies: an honest broker? *Australian Journal of International Affairs* [on-line]. 2017, vol. 71, no. 4, p. 389-404 [cit. 2022-02-20]. DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2016.1269147.

Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2016.1269147?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

MNFL and the MILF.<sup>57</sup> *“However, this aid ended once Tun Datu Mustapha lost the 1976 elections due to much discontent among the Sabahans, who feared a continued influx of Moros.”*<sup>58</sup> These fled the erupting conflict on Mindanao in droves and sought refuge in the Sabah province. But even though Malaysia facilitated the beginning of the Moro independence movement, the MILF did not yet exist when the support ceased, making its influence on the MILF strategy negligible.

### Terrain and climate

Majority of the MILF activity was confined to the island of Mindanao, which was also the place of the 2000 government offensive. The Philippine islands are of volcanic origin and are mostly mountainous. Mindanao is home to the highest point of the country, the 2.9 km high Mount Apo. Several mountain ranges stretch through the island, typically covered with tropical rainforests; however, the forest coverage has been steadily declining since the 1990s due to illegal logging. At the time of the offensive in 2000, the forest coverage was approximately 29% of the country<sup>59</sup> and often frustrated the efforts of government forces. The monsoon weather of the island played a similar role. During the campaign,

*“moderate to heavy rainfall hampered AFP operations. Soil and dirt roads were rendered almost impassable, impeding mobility of troops and equipment. The heavy downpours rendered impracticable manoeuvring light tanks and deploying or relocating heavy artillery pieces. Moreover, poor visibility due to fog interrupted ground assaults and rendered less effective supporting artillery fire and air strikes.”*<sup>60</sup>

Other than that, MILF camps

*“were located in forests, with lush vegetation, coconut grooves, fruit bearing trees and other plants. Aside from hindering mobility of AFP troops and equipment, the environment greatly reduced the visibility of the insurgents and provided them natural concealment and cover. It also allowed for excellent fortifications, such as advanced posts, bunkers, foxholes, and other entrenchments, lending further advantage to the MILF.”*<sup>61</sup>

All in all, the picture of Mindanao is of a heavily mountainous island with tropical climate, covered at least partly by rainforest, a perfect environment for guerrilla warfare.

While planning the offensive, the AFP anticipated that the MILF would resort precisely to the kind of guerrilla tactics used by insurgents in Vietnam or Malaysia. It was

---

<sup>57</sup> CHE MAN, W. K. *Muslim Separatism: The Moros in Southern Philippines and the Malays in Southern Thailand*. Canberra: Australian National University, 1987. ISBN-13: 978-0195889246.

<sup>58</sup> THALANG, ref. 55., p. 397.

<sup>59</sup> BUTLER, Rhett. Sri Lanka Forest Information and Data. *Mongabay* [on-line]. 2011 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: [https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Sri\\_Lanka.htm](https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Sri_Lanka.htm)

<sup>60</sup> POBRE - QUILOP, ref. 52, p. 121.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

expected that the MILF would seek to draw the government forces into protracted fights in heavy terrain around peripheral camps and outposts which could be abandoned without any negative consequences while frustrating the enemy with ambushes, snipers, and hit and run attacks.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, the SOG terrorist division would mount a terrorist campaign in the Philippine cities, seeking to put additional pressure on the government and increase the political and economic cost of the offensive. This assessment was supported by intelligence uncovered in 1994, which described the so-called Zero Hour Plan. The plan was a fail-safe to be carried out in the event of an all-out offensive of the government and included attacking military camps, blowing up bridges to prevent the movement of AFP troops, bombing urban areas, setting up roadblocks on strategic points along national highways and cutting power lines.<sup>63</sup>

However, the MILF forces proved to be much less capable than they were given credit for. Aside from being unable to solve some logistic and tactical challenges, the MILF arguably adopted a wrong strategy. The geography of Mindanao was especially suited to guerrilla warfare and the government forces expected and worried about the effect it could have on their forces. However, the MILF leadership instead decided to fight a conventional war and try to hold on to its territory. The decision was influenced by historical experience, the image of the MILF as a counter state to the Philippine government, and economic motivation.

In their resistance against the Spanish, the Moro people relied on building fortified camps in heavy terrain, which was quite effective at the time. However, during the 2000 offensive, the MILF wrongly concluded that the same strategy would be applicable. The MILF decided on fighting a conventional war against the AFP, not realizing that defending static fortifications gave enormous advantage to the better equipped and better trained AFP.

Another reason for fighting a conventional war was that the MILF was still trying to project itself as a counter state to the official government. The MILF created a structure of parallel government based on Islamic laws and traditions with its largest camp at its centre. Camp Abubakar served as the headquarters, but also the capital and the nucleus of the future independent Bangsamoro state. It housed Sharia courts, prisons, sanctioned banking institutions, retail stores, a military academy and limited arms manufacturing. The camp was also at the centre of the greatest agricultural production site and the communities around it continued to yield harvests and help finance the MILF.<sup>64</sup>

Either way, the AFP was better adapted to conventional fighting. The use of artillery and aerial bombardment against static fortifications proved so effective that by the time the MILF came to its senses and adopted a guerrilla strategy, it had already lost most of its camps in Mindanao, including Camp Abubakar.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> FRANCO, Joseph. The Philippines: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front - A Pragmatic Power Structure? PRISM: *The Journal of Complex Operations* [on-line]. 2016 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://cco.ndu.edu/news/article/780183/chapter-7-the-philippines-the-moro-islamic-liberation-front-a-pragmatic-power-s/>

## Population and economy

One of the previous chapters explored how the configuration of the Philippines drove the decentralization and ultimately fragmentation of the MILF. The other two factors that played a role were the population and economy of the Moro people. The Moro people make up 11% of the 100,000,000 people in the Philippines.<sup>65</sup> Moros predominantly inhabit the southern and western Mindanao, southern Palawan, and the Sulu Archipelago. However, they are not a homogenous group. *“In addition to being divided by different languages and political structures, the separate groups also differed in their degree of Islamic orthodoxy.”*<sup>66</sup>

Mindanao has traditionally been one of the poorest regions of the country, currently holding about a quarter of the whole Philippine population but almost a third of its poor.<sup>67</sup> Even before the emergence of the armed conflict, the region struggled due to poor administration and overall neglect by the central government and depended on agricultural products for livelihood.<sup>68</sup> *“Mindanao is a poor region of a poor country, and lack of opportunity makes a life of crime attractive to former insurgents.”*<sup>69</sup> Poverty is exacerbated by the uneven distribution of land between Muslims and Christians, in the favour of the latter. This makes groups like the MILF or the notorious Abu Sayyaf much more attractive. In fact, abductions are far more prevalent than violent attacks. There is also evidence that the MILF and even MNLF cooperate with Abu Sayyaf in their kidnappings, which suggests that the motivation behind their actions is as much economic as it is political.

Aside from religious tax and illicit activities such as kidnappings, extortion, and racketeering, a major part of the MILF revenue was generated through agriculture in the central regions of Mindanao.<sup>70</sup> But the struggle for resources in such a poor environment often resulted in local disputes between individual MILF communities and leaders over their spheres of influence in extortion or arable land. Ethnic and geographic fragmentation coupled with poverty then caused the individual MILF cells to outwardly behave much more like a regional militia or even an economically motivated criminal group. This partially explains their decision to stand their ground in the face of the 2000 government offensive.

## Summary

The overarching theme of the Moro struggle for independence is fragmentation. The physical geography of the Philippine archipelago and the distances involved promote decentralized structure and command. These are further exacerbated by human geography: the multitude of different Moro language groups, varying levels of Islamic fundamentalism and shortage of resources (or personal ambitions of lower-level leaders

---

<sup>65</sup> Population. *The World Bank* [on-line]. 2020 [cit. 2022-02-20]. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

<sup>66</sup> DOLAN, ref. 44.

<sup>67</sup> The World Bank, ref. 65.

<sup>68</sup> HUANG, Lisa - MUSEMBI, Victor - PETRONIC, Ljiljana. *The State-Moro Conflict in the Philippines*. Ottawa: Carleton University, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Stratfor, ref. 49.

<sup>70</sup> FRANCO, ref. 64.

and familial ties). These differences and the struggle for limited resources led to internal conflicts and made the MILF an ineffective fighting force during the all-out war in 2000. The local commanders did not coordinate their efforts and none of the units were able to operate further than a few kilometres from their home bases. The agricultural economy, historical experience, and the image of the MILF as a counter state all led to the decision to fight conventionally, even though the geography was ideal for a guerrilla war.

## CONCLUSION

The physical geography of Sri Lanka was one of the driving forces behind the successes of the LTTE. The case study showed how the group was able to capitalize on the diverse geography of the island to conduct conventional, guerrilla, and terrorist operations both on land and on sea. Geography also determined the area of operations for the insurgents and greatly increased the value of some objectives, such as the Elephant Pass or the city of Jaffna, and the proximity to the Tamil Nadu province enabled clandestine support from India.

In the case of the MILF, human geography was a much more prominent force. Fragmentation of the Philippine archipelago promoted decentralized command and control structures and the differences between individual cells were further amplified by cultural, religious and language differences among the Moros. The poverty of Mindanao also drove a wedge between the insurgents and caused internal conflicts over arable land and criminal spheres of influence. But the 2000 government offensive proved that the group's military capabilities were much smaller than expected and that the decision to hold their ground was a mistake.

The last example shows that geography cannot explain insurgent strategy on its own. Based on the gathered intelligence, analysis of the terrain, and the history of other Asian insurgencies, the Armed Forces of the Philippines rightfully anticipated that the MILF would resort to guerrilla warfare, which it did not. Both case studies showed that the examined factors of geography (location, size, configuration, borders, terrain, climate, population, and economy) merely create opportunities or incentivize certain capabilities or behaviour. Whether those opportunities are recognized and exploited is then determined by other entries in the decision-making process, for example experience, personality, goals, or resources. The comparison also shows that geographic conditions can also influence the organizational structure, resilience, degree of centralization, or the level of coherence and coordination within an insurgent group and/or network.

Finally, the application of Galula's principles in practice also revealed their shortcomings. His theory of geography is not very complex and therefore open to conflicting interpretation by different scholars. The importance of the 8 geographic categories is apparent, but their effects on the insurgent and counterinsurgent forces are heavily dependent on the context of the conflict. Some are just as likely to align with Galula's expectations as they are to deviate from them (climate, for example). Still, the list serves as a solid starting point for a geo-strategic analysis, but Galula's interpretation should not be taken as a universal truth.