The world watched with interest as Sri Lanka defeated the LTTE in the final Eelam War. Wall Street Journal announced ‘for all those who argue there no military solution for terrorism, we have two words: Sri Lanka’. Washington Times editorial of 25.4.2009 said ‘Sri Lankans are winning; we should let them finish the job. Obama administration should mind its own business.’

Sri Lanka’s achievement was immediately recognized. Sri Lanka was unanimously granted Dialogue Partner status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2009. This is an important regional group, which pays special attention to terrorism and security. Its members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Dialogue Partner status is given to a state which shares its objectives and wishes to establish a partnership with the Organization. There was only one dialogue partner, Afghanistan, before the inclusion of Sri Lanka and Belarus. India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran have observer status. USA’s request for observer status was rejected.

Sri Lanka made several innovations in order to win the war. The government started a website, "Defence.lk" in order to obtain public support for the war. This website was a great success. It became the most visited Sri Lanka website, with a daily average of 8 to 13 million hits. It provided hourly updates on the progress of the war. "Defence.lk" was the subject of a MBA research project.

Sri Lanka devised a ‘unique arrangement’ to keep India briefed on Eelam War IV. A team consisting of Defence Secretary, Secretary to President and Basil Rajapaksa was formed, by passing the Foreign Ministry. India was represented by its Foreign Secretary, National Security Advisor and Defense Secretary. Gotabhaya Rajapakse said ‘We visited India many times, they came here and we discussed many issues. Lines of communication were kept open at all times. There was continuous dialogue and the war continued unhindered’. India is now considering using this model in its discussion with other nations.

The armed forces had to innovate if they wished to win the war. In 1983 Sri Lanka had created a Special Task Force (STF) of hand picked police officers with para military training. STF is the only paramilitary organization in the world which has police powers. STF officers were trained in ‘jungle warfare techniques’ and handling infantry weapons. They were given special training in counter insurgency and counter terrorist operations. They could combat terrorism and insurgency with minimum casualties. The STF operated in teams of eight or less and could fight in a variety of situations such as built up areas, and close quarter battle.

The STF was effective in Eelam war IV and the LTTE assassinated the head of its training school in order to halt its operations. STF was mainly deployed in the eastern theatre. It destroyed 24 LTTE bases in Kanchikudichchi Aru jungle while the army went into Thoppigala. This combined campaign continued till Thoppigala fell in 2007. In 2009, STF went after the LTTE in Yala and then took over the A9 road from Omanthai to Kanagarayakulam via Pulyankulam. STF also protected the Sinhala villages around Kebethigollawa. STF has been
recognized internationally. It has trained military teams from Maldives and India. It was one of the few agencies invited for security assessment duties at the Olympics at Beijing.

The main tactic used by the LTTE at sea was the ‘swarm attack’ of 20-25 boats with 5-6 suicide craft and sophisticated equipment. Each boat had about 15 persons, with each combatant donned in helmet, body amour and carrying a personal weapon. Swarms were used to attack isolated naval craft, to escort LTTE craft coming from deep sea carrying ammunitions, and also terrorists moving along the coastline. To counter this, the Navy decided to create its own ‘swarm’.

Navy engineers designed three types of small, high-speed, heavily armed inshore patrol craft, suitable for operations in different types of sea. These boats were built at Welisara where there were rudimentary facilities for boat building. 150 boats were manufactured in three years. It took just eight days to complete and fully equip a single craft. "We manufactured these boats through day and night because we needed them quickly ". They manufactured more than one hundred 23- feet long, fibre glass ‘Arrow’ boats, powered by Japanese 200 horsepower outboard motors. ‘Arrow’ was very effective in shallow waters where Dvora could not go. There was also a 17-meter long command-cum-fighting boat. All boats were manned by highly trained sailors from elite units, such as the Special Boat Squadron.

In 2007 the navy was able to launch a flotilla of “Arrow” boats which outnumbered the LTTE boats. When LTTE launched 20 boats, the navy launched 40. It was ‘swarm against swarm’. The boats operated in groups of four. Squadrons consisting of 25-30 craft were kept at strategically important locations. Squadrons could be shifted from place to place in a very short time. They were combined when necessary and about 60 boats were available for some battles. These boats used infantry tactics. They went in arrowhead formation or in three adjacent columns in single file so as to mask their numbers and increase the navy’s element of surprise.

Earlier there were long drawn out naval battles, some as long as 12 hours. But with the arrival of these small boats, the encounter became shorter. In 2008 there were only three such encounters. The Sea Tiger capabilities declined dramatically with this. They were not allowed to close in on valuable targets. Sri Lanka’s ‘Small Boats project’ was given an unprecedented six page write up in the prestigious ‘Jane’s Navy International” in March 2009. Jane’s International’s maritime reporter Tim Fish noted that the western media had completely ignored this project. He said that other navies should study the Sri Lanka Navy’s modus operandi, in particular its strategies for defeating a four-dimensional insurgent group, operating on land, air, surface of the seas and underwater.

The Navy also created On Board Security Teams (OBST). These were deployed on merchant ships to provide security when the ships transited through dangerous waters. These well trained teams were an effective deterrent against terrorist attack. Navy authorities said these teams could be used to combat modern day piracy. Recently, Sri Lanka’s Permanent Representative at the UN, Palitha Kohona pointed out to the UN Security Council, that the dense shipping lanes south of Sri Lanka had been free of any piracy in the past 28 years, despite heavy traffic. This was due to On Board Security Teams. They were a visible deterrent, they could react immediately to attacks. He said Sri Lanka was ready to share its expertise and personnel
regarding the OBST with the rest of the world.

Had the govt ordered an all out war effort, ignoring civilian casualties, the war would have been over in February 2009. UN chief Ban Ki-moon, when he flew over the Vanni battlefield in the last stages of the war, had asked why they did not carryout an amphibious assault on the Mullaitivu beach to conclude the offensive. The President ordered a No Fire Zone, in the east where the LTTE was using the villagers as a massive human shield. Air attacks were prohibited and army was ordered not to use heavy guns while LTTE continued to use them. The decision to create a No-fire Zone was Sri Lanka's own, innovative decision. International law did not demand this. This No-fire Zone is unique to Sri Lanka. Gotabhaya Rajapakse said that other countries should also follow its example.

~ www.island.lk ~ by Kamalika Pieris