Military Governance in Post-War Sri Lanka: Revisiting the Logic of Downsizing

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More than a decade after Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, the country still maintains one of the world's largest standing armies. This enduring militarisation cannot be explained by conventional security needs or fiscal prudence. Sri Lanka is an island with no land borders and faces no significant external military threat, yet its Army remains bloated, Why? The core argument advanced here is that the Sri Lankan military's size persists due to its embedded role in internal governance and an ethno-political project of state-building, rather than any realistic defence requirements. In the Tamil-majority northern and eastern provinces, the Army has become an instrument for controlling territory, reshaping civilian life, and entrenching a centralized Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist vision of the state. In short, the military is not merely defending Sri Lanka's sovereignty – it is helping *construct* a particular kind of post-war order within Sri Lanka.

This perspective builds on, but fundamentally departs from, the critique made by analyst Daniel Alphonsus in 2021. Alphonsus's study *Sri Lanka's Post-War Defence Budget: Overspending and Underprotection* questioned why *an island nation with minimal strategic threats maintains such a large army* . He concluded that Colombo spends too much on defence and that resources are misallocated – for example, lavish funding of ground forces at the expense of air and naval capacity. Alphonsus proposed technocratic fixes such as downsizing the Army, increasing reserves, and reallocating budgets. While these recommendations are sensible on paper, they overlook the deeper political logic at work. The following analysis reframes Sri Lanka's outsized military as a deliberate tool of governance and ethnic domination in the post-war era. The discussion first examines why a resurgence of armed conflict is unlikely ("No War"), then explores how the military has instead been repurposed for domestic control ("War by Other Means"). Finally, it considers why proposed downsizing has faltered and what a truly sustainable peace would require.

No War, But No Genuine Peace

It might seem intuitive that once a civil war ends, a country would scale back its armed forces. In Sri Lanka's case, multiple indicators show that a renewed insurgency or major threat is highly improbable. Alphonsus outlines four key reasons why a large-scale Tamil rebellion is unlikely to re-emerge:

Political Disillusionment: Minority grievances remain serious and unresolved, but they no longer translate into armed rebellion. Decades of discrimination and the brutal defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have left many Tamil people with diminished expectations of change. Today's Tamil youth did not come of age with the idealistic fervor of the 1970s; instead, they grew up in the shadow of the LTTE's crushing defeat. There is little appetite for returning to war when the memory of 2009 looms large as a cautionary tale.

Loss of External Support: In the 1980s, Tamil militancy benefited from geopolitical currents – most notably, support from India. That era is over. India, shocked by the LTTE's assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and keen to preserve regional stability, has firmly withdrawn its support for any separatist movement. The LTTE is a banned terrorist organization internationally, and the post-9/11 world is hostile to armed insurgencies. No foreign patron is likely to bankroll or shelter a new Tamil militant campaign.

State Military Supremacy: The balance of power has shifted decisively in the Sri Lankan state's favor. During the early war years, Sri Lanka's military was poorly equipped and often outmatched by a guerrilla force that innovated with superior tactics and technology. Today, Sri Lanka fields one of the largest and best-trained militaries in the region. Years of war and investment have given it robust intelligence networks, modern equipment, and bases across the island. Crucially, the Tamil population has been demilitarized and demoralized – the LTTE's seasoned fighters are gone, and much of the Tamil middle class (once a source of leadership and resources for the rebellion) has emigrated or been silenced. Any potential militant revival would face a vastly more formidable adversary than in the past.

Unfavorable Demographics: The demographic conditions that once fueled insurgency have changed. In the 1980s, a *youth bulge* amid high unemployment provided ready recruits for rebel movements. By contrast, today only about a quarter of Northern Province males are in the prime 15–29 age bracket, and youth unemployment there, while above the national average, is nowhere near the explosive levels of the early 1980s. Simply put, the pool of disaffected young men available to take up arms has shrunk, and those coming of age have more economic opportunities (including private sector jobs and migration for work) than the previous generation did.

Taken together, these factors make a return to large-scale armed conflict extremely remote. Indeed, Alphonsus convincingly shows that *Sri Lanka's security environment today does not warrant a massive standing army*. If strategic logic prevailed, one would expect force reduction and a shift of resources toward naval and air capabilities to address emerging non-traditional threats (such as cyber security). Yet no meaningful downsizing has occurred. This apparent paradox is the first clue that strategic logic is *not* the real driver of Sri Lanka's military policy.

Equally important is what Alphonsus's analysis *misses*: the adaptive resilience of Tamil nationalism in non-violent forms. It is true that the space for another violent uprising has closed, but that does not mean Tamil political aspirations have vanished. On the contrary, Tamil society has recalibrated its resistance into civic and democratic avenues rather than armed struggle. For instance, in February 2021, thousands of Tamils (along with Muslim allies) undertook the *Pottuvil to Polikandy (P2P) march*, a peaceful five-day protest that traversed the traditional Tamil homeland from the Eastern to Northern tip. The marchers demanded an end to land grabs, military occupation, and the suppression of minority rights, even as Sri Lankan security forces tried to obstruct them with court injunctions and intimidation. Commemorations of wartime atrocities also continue annually in places like Mullivaikkal (the site where the civil war's bloody finale unfolded), despite official crackdowns. Meanwhile, the Tamil diaspora has pursued legal advocacy and international awareness campaigns to seek justice for war crimes. All these actions demonstrate that Tamil political consciousness remains very much alive – it has shifted from bullets to ballots, from jungle insurgency to courthouse and street protests. In other words, *while another war is unlikely, a just peace is also absent*. Grievances fester and transform into new modes of activism. This context is crucial: the Sri Lankan government's heavy military presence in former war zones is not reacting to an active insurgency, but rather working to pre-empt and suppress *non-violent* forms of dissent and self-determination.

The Army's Expanding Role: War by Other Means

If there is no credible military threat inside Sri Lanka, why has the Army not only remained large but *expanded its role*? The years since 2009 have seen the Sri Lankan armed forces move far beyond conventional defence tasks. In the Tamil-majority North and East – the areas devastated by the civil war – the military today functions as an all-purpose arm of the state: an occupying garrison, an economic developer, and a cultural gatekeeper all in one. Military camps that dotted these regions during the war were not dismantled when fighting ended; instead, many were strengthened and repurposed for peacetime domination. A leading Sri Lankan Catholic priest and academic, Jude Lal Fernando, has starkly described this phenomenon as *"war by other means"* – meaning that the government is effectively continuing the war's aims through militarised governance in lieu of open combat.

One dimension of this is *direct governance and economic control*. In the former warzone districts, soldiers are a constant presence in daily civilian life. The military runs farms and shops, builds and repairs roads and schools, and even manages tourism sites and preschools. In areas like Weli Oya (original Tamil name: Manal Aru) – a strategic region where the state-sponsored Mahaweli Development Programme has settled Sinhalese farmers on traditionally

Tamil lands – the Army is deeply involved in managing the resettlement process. Troops there have been tasked with transporting Sinhala settlers into the area, constructing houses for them, and allocating seized lands for new settlements. What is ostensibly an economic development or irrigation scheme thus doubles as a demographic-engineering project under military supervision. The presence of uniformed soldiers effectively guarantees that these new Sinhala settlements take root securely, often to the exclusion or displacement of local Tamils. This *militarisation of land and population* is not a temporary post-war emergency measure; it is a long-term strategy to assert central government control over formerly restive regions. By planting garrisons and settlements, the state aims to forestall any future separatist sentiments through sheer on-the-ground dominance.

Another facet is the *filling of institutional vacuums*. After the war, instead of empowering local civil administration in the North and East, Colombo allowed civilian governance structures to wither. The Northern Provincial Council, for example, was established via the 13th Amendment (as a limited form of devolution), but it has been effectively neutered – elections have been postponed for years and the council has no real authority over critical subjects like land or policing. In this governance void, the military has stepped in as the de facto administrator. Army officers often perform roles akin to government agents: coordinating disaster relief, distributing aid and supplies, and overseeing development projects without consulting elected local leaders. A defender of the military's involvement might argue that the Army is merely helping out where civilian capacity is weak. But this reasoning begs the question: *why has civilian capacity not been rebuilt in the first place?* The answer lies in political choices. Keeping local governance weak and leaning on the military allows the central government to **bypass local consent** and tightly control these regions. It's governance through occupation – a model where authority flows from Colombo through military channels, rather than arising from the affected community itself.

Perhaps the most striking (and disturbing) element of post-war militarisation is its *symbolic and cultural impact*. The Sri Lankan state, via its military, has undertaken what can be described as an ambitious social engineering campaign to "Sri Lankan-ise" (or more bluntly, Sinhalise and Buddhisize) the North and East. This involves altering the cultural landscape to imprint a Sinhala-Buddhist identity on traditionally Tamil, largely Hindu or Christian, areas. For instance, new *Buddha statues and Buddhist shrines have been erected in numerous locations* where no significant Buddhist population ever lived, often directly adjacent to or on top of Hindu temples and Christian churches that were damaged in the war. Roads and villages have been rechristened with Sinhala names. In some cases, Buddhist stupas or monasteries are built literally over the ruins of Hindu sites, with resident monks protected by nearby military camps. Locals justifiably see these as assertions of religious-political dominance – it sends the message that "this land is now Sinhala-Buddhist, and guarded by the Army". Scholars and human rights groups have documented many such cases of *state-sponsored "Buddhisisation"* in the Tamil homeland.

These symbolic acts are not random or merely devotional; they serve a strategic purpose. By redefining public space and historical memory, the state seeks to normalize the notion that the North and East are an integral part of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation. Jude Lal Fernando observes that the post-war expansion of Sinhala Buddhist symbols into Tamil areas, under military protection, is essentially a continuation of the conquest — a "*victor's peace*" built on *unquestioned dominance rather than genuine reconciliation*. In this paradigm, peace does not mean two communities living together with mutual recognition; it means one side's unilateral victory cemented into the landscape and governance structures. Military camps themselves are seen as guardians of this new order. It is telling that memorials for fallen LTTE fighters have been bulldozed or appropriated as Army camps or markets, while monuments glorifying the Sri Lankan military's victory have proliferated. The armed forces thus operate not only as an occupation force but as cultural arbiters – celebrating one version of history while actively suppressing the symbols and even the grieving rituals of the defeated side. This "war by other means" targets the *identity and psyche* of the Tamil community: temples, language, land ownership, and local demography are all being reshaped under the watch of armed soldiers.

The Downsizing Debate: A Political Problem, Not a Technical One

Given this reality, proposals to simply "right-size" Sri Lanka's military – to cut costs or improve efficiency – were always likely to falter. Alphonsus's 2021 study highlighted, with clear data, how anomalous Sri Lanka's post-war defence spending is. According to his findings, *defence expenditure actually increased after the war* when adjusted

for inflation. During the final phase of the civil war (2006–2009), Sri Lanka spent about US $1.5 billion per year on its military; in the post-war period (2009–2017) it spent roughly $1.7 billion annually. In other words, even after the guns fell silent, the government spent more on its military than it did at the height of active hostilities. Defence outlays have consistently hovered around 2.0–2.5% of GDP post-2009, which is three times the pre-war (1948–1982) average of ~0.8%. By global standards, Sri Lanka is a *heavy militariser* for a country at peace. The island's population ranks around 58th in the world, yet by the early 2020s its Army was estimated to be the world's 24th largest. This imbalance is reflected in force structure too: Sri Lanka allocates the lion's share of its defence budget to the Army (ground forces), whereas one would expect a maritime nation's priority to shift towards the Navy and Air Force in peacetime. The result is that huge numbers of soldiers remain on the payroll (along with their pensions and perks), soaking up resources that could be used for development or true external defense modernization. From a purely technocratic viewpoint, this looks like gross overspending and misallocation.

However, the crucial point – and the main argument of this article – is that*Sri Lanka's bloated military is a feature of the political status quo, not a bug*. The Army's size is not simply an outcome of inertia or bureaucratic inefficiency that can be fixed with better planning. Rather, it reflects deliberate political choices. The government in Colombo (dominated by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology) *wants* a large standing army, because that army serves domestic political ends. It allows the state to project power into every corner of the island, especially the former war zones, and to do so with an authority that cannot easily be challenged. In the north and east, a downsized military would mean relinquishing the daily grip over Tamil populations and their lands – a prospect the current state elite finds unacceptable. As long as the *political calculus* is that a strong military presence is necessary to prevent "separatism" (read: to keep the Tamils politically subjugated), no amount of fiscal argumentation will induce a significant force reduction. In this sense, calls to cut the defence budget or trim the Army are *politically unrealistic* in today's context, even if they are economically sound. To downsize the military would not just be a budgetary decision; it would be a *redistribution of power* away from the central government and its security apparatus, towards the periphery. That is precisely why it has not happened.

International dynamics have also insulated Sri Lanka's military-first approach. In 2009, major world powers tacitly or overtly supported the crushing of the LTTE – India provided intelligence and diplomatic cover, China supplied arms and funding, and Western nations, while urging caution, largely viewed the war through the lens of counter-terrorism. After the war, global attention shifted elsewhere, and Sri Lanka faced limited external pressure to demilitarize or reconcile. In fact, international aid for post-war reconstruction often flowed through the central government and military, unintentionally reinforcing Colombo's top-down control. The framing of Sri Lanka's conflict in the global arena as a fight against "terrorism" rather than an ethnic struggle for rights enabled the government to label its continued heavy security footprint as a legitimate measure to ensure stability. The concept of a "victor's peace" – where the victor imposes the terms and structures of peace without accommodating the loser – aptly describes Sri Lanka's post-2009 trajectory. The United Nations and foreign governments have periodically raised concerns about human rights and militarisation, but these criticisms have not translated into any significant change on the ground. In essence, the *absence of war* in Sri Lanka has been mistakenly equated with the presence of peace. As long as the victorious state maintains order (through its Army), many external actors have been content to treat the situation as stable, glossing over the simmering injustices underneath. This international acquiescence reduces incentives for Sri Lanka's leaders to embrace a risky course like demobilising thousands of soldiers or genuinely sharing power with Tamils.

None of this is to say that downsizing the military is a bad idea – on the contrary, it is essential for Sri Lanka's long-term health. But the point is *downsizing cannot be treated as a mere administrative reform*. It strikes at the very heart of the post-war political order. Alphonsus's recommendations (e.g., to shift towards a leaner reserve-based force, cut excess troops, and invest in modern naval capabilities) are logical, yet implementing them would require dismantling the Army's entrenched role in society. That, in turn, would require a fundamental rethinking of how Sri Lanka is governed. It would mean trusting civilian institutions (including those in Tamil areas) to manage their affairs without military supervision. It would mean seeing Tamils not as a hostile population to be pacified, but as equal citizens to be empowered. In blunt terms, it would mean the Sri Lankan state accepting limits on its own unitary authority – an idea that Sinhala nationalist leaders have been loath to contemplate.

Conclusion: Towards a Different Peace

Sri Lanka's persistent militarisation over a decade after its civil war signals that the conflict's core issues remain unresolved. The country may not be fighting a shooting war anymore, but it is effectively *occupying its own land* and people under the banner of security. The logic of downsizing the armed forces collides with the logic of a state that equates security with domination. As long as Colombo's vision of "peace" is one where the Tamil-speaking North and East are subdued and controlled, the Army will continue to be the regime's instrument of choice to enforce that vision. This is the uncomfortable truth: the oversized Sri Lankan military is not protecting the nation from an external enemy, but rather policing an internal political order.

Breaking this cycle will require political courage and a paradigm shift in governance. A genuine post-war reconciliation would involve *demilitarising governance* and restoring civilian rule in the former conflict areas. Concrete steps would include returning illegally occupied land to its rightful owners, reducing the Army's footprint in day-to-day economic activities, and re-establishing elected provincial administrations with real powers over local affairs (such as land, policing, and education). It would also necessitate acknowledging and respecting the cultural and historical rights of the Tamil people – for instance, allowing them to memorialise their dead and protecting their heritage sites instead of overwriting them. In essence, Sri Lanka would need to move from a majoritarian unitary state towards a more pluralistic and federal-minded approach, where minorities feel a sense of ownership in the country's future. Such a transformation is daunting, but it is also the only path toward a *sustainable peace* that is founded on justice rather than force.

Until those deeper changes occur, calls for military downsizing will remain a technocratic fix tacked onto a political problem. The Sri Lankan Army's size and influence will shrink only when the state no longer sees value in using the military to govern and intimidate its own citizens. That, in turn, hinges on answering a fundamental question:*What kind of peace does Sri Lanka want – one that is maintained by the constant presence of soldiers, or one that emerges from winning the trust and partnership of all its communities?* The experience of the past decade suggests that peace through domination is inherently brittle. A stable and democratic Sri Lanka cannot be built on the backs of an occupying army in its own land. Downsizing the military is not just about saving money or updating defence strategy; it is about choosing the legitimacy of civil governance over the brute expedience of military control. Only when Sri Lanka's leaders make that choice – prioritising political reconciliation over perpetual securitisation – will the logic of a leaner military truly take hold. In the meantime, the oversized army stands as a stark reminder that *ending a war is not the same as building a peace*, and that the wounds of the war cannot heal under the shadow of a gun.

About the author:

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