

ASYMMETRY AND AFTERMATH:THE PKK AND LTTE PEACE EXPERIENCES

Özcan Çetin | January 15, 2026



Executive Summary

The fates of Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) bring opposing answers to the same fundamental question. Both movements arose from similar socio-political dynamics: oppressed minorities demanding recognition. Both built state-like bodies and strong militaries that resisted for decades against nation-states.

Nevertheless, the outcomes in the two situations differed significantly. Colombo achieved a decisive military victory in 2009 by eliminating the LTTE through a campaign of annihilation. Ankara, after half a century of volatility between denial/coercion and dialogue, attempted to negotiate with the PKK, first in 2015 and subsequently in 2025. This contrast emphasizes how shifting geopolitical dynamics, institutional resilience, and diplomatic capacity shape the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts.

The Organizational Structure of the LTTE

In 1994-95, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)'s Chandrika Kumaratunga offered a proposal called Peace Through Devolution (PTD). The PTD suggested wide cultural and administrative autonomy within a special status for the Northeast provinces that were under LTTE control while preserving Sri Lanka's unitary structure. The PTD proposed that each state would have its own autonomous security forces under the central government's supervision. However, the central government would retain the right to take control of local security forces in "case of emergency." These articles were subtly inserted into this otherwise generous autonomy proposal, which caused the LTTE to refuse it and restart the war with the Trincomalee attack. In that way, the Sri Lankan state, whether intentionally or not, successfully convinced the world's public opinion that it is the LTTE that is the war-mongering party in the conflict.

LTTE had been commanded by Velupillai Prabhakaran since its founding, which fueled speculations that the organization itself failed to respect democratic

principles¹. Although the LTTE perhaps regarded a single-leader rule as a strong attribute, it in fact constituted an obvious vulnerability since it brought organizational rigidity, which later caused internal splits. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that lack of organizational flexibility likely caused the defection of Colonel Karuna with 4,000 fighters- a split that contributed to the collapse of the LTTE.

As military struggles often create their own political arms, the LTTE also founded its own in 1989, which was named the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT). The relations between the PFLT and the LTTE have demonstrated a dominance in favor of the LTTE. Domination and direct control by the LTTE limited the PFLT's capability to produce policies in the Sri Lankan political landscape, and ultimately the PFLT was dissolved in 1992². Another political party that had close ties to the LTTE was the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), created in 2001. The TNA was a sort of umbrella organization of all Tamil political parties in Sri Lanka. Although receiving support from the LTTE, the TNA never became an LTTE-affiliated party. It is likely that LTTE avoided establishing a political party out of concern that it would undermine claims of independence. In fact, historically, the LTTE frequently boycotted Sri Lankan elections. The LTTE last boycotted the 2005 presidential election.

PKK's Organizational Structure

Would the PKK have accepted the PTD solution? In the half-century long PKK-Turkey conflict, the PKK has been the party

This approach carefully avoided maximalist demands by framing them within the themes of democracy and human rights. As an extended example, the demands of PKK's sister organization in Rojava from Damascus can be compared with the PTD solution.

Despite being led by its founding leader, Abdullah Öcalan, since its formation, the PKK has maintained its internal architecture as an institutional system. The

establishment of a Presidential Council immediately after Abdullah Öcalan's imprisonment and congresses held at regular intervals demonstrate this institutional discipline. In its 5th General Congress in 1995, PKK emphasized the independence of Kurdistan with a notable addition that emphasizes "democratization of Turkey." At the 6th General Congress in 1999, this emphasis became stronger by recalling "a peaceful solution within a democratic republic." At the 7th Congress in 1999, the year PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was imprisoned; PKK set up the "Presidential Council" mechanism. These congresses hint to the PKK's strategy in the 2000s. The creation of a Presidential Council in response to the arrest of its founding-leader, PKK showed readiness to adapt to extraordinary circumstances³.

In terms of engaging within Turkey's political landscape, PKK has shown a sharp-witted strategy. PKK projects the image of being well-versed in politics since it was originally founded as a political party. Therefore, for the PKK, playing a role in Turkey's political landscape and elections was as critical as its military power. In this regard, it is not uncommon to find PKK-affiliated civil society organizations (CSO) and political parties in Turkey. However, relations between the PKK and these CSOs and political parties have been confederalist and ideological alliances rather than proxies. Kurdish politicians ran under the umbrella of left-wing parties in the early 1990s and later as independent candidates to overcome the 10% election threshold. Kurdish politicians' success in elections was a strong emphasis on democratic autonomy⁴. Kurdish politicians have also served as mediators between the PKK and Turkey. The autonomous and non-centralized PKK and Kurdish movement created a rapid decision-making mechanism. This alliance can also be counted as a counterbalance to a highly centralized Turkey, which is an economic, military, and diplomatic powerhouse.

LTTE Internal and External Dynamics

The conflict in Sri Lanka, lasting roughly the same length of time as the Turkey-PKK conflict, saw the government and the LTTE hold eight peace talks in total⁵. In the case of Sri Lanka, peace talks were conducted from the outset with the mediation of regional powers such as India and an international peace broker. The rivalry between Sri Lanka's two major political parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP), could have been one of the main reasons behind the intractability of the Tamil issue. The Indo-Lanka Accord, signed in 1987 under the UNP government, led to large protests in the south of the country, resulting in the death of 132 protestors.⁶

Likewise, the ceasefire announced by SLFP's Kumaratunga in 1994 became the subject of UNP's objections, which recalled the ceasefire as "concessions to Tamil separatism"⁷. In Sri Lanka, the turn toward the military option was caused more by international than by domestic dynamics. The Sri Lankan government took advantage of the new concept of global threat in the post-9/11 era. It sought to have the LTTE designated as a terrorist organization in Western capitals and to halt financial flows from the Tamil diaspora. In fact, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was the mastermind behind these policies, came to power in the 2005 elections that were boycotted by the LTTE⁸. Rajapaksa took direct control over the ministries of defense and finance in order to end the de facto dual administration, which was one of the main reasons for the collapse of past negotiations and peace talks. Rajapaksa also strengthened the army's capacity by increasing manpower to 70% and signing a significant arms deal with China⁹. Sri Lanka's intransigence in the very last peace talks ended with the withdrawal of the LTTE from the talks, which led to an unfavorable impression of the LTTE in diplomatic circles¹⁰.

PKK's Internal and External Dynamics

The half-century conflict between Turkey and the PKK has only seen two official peace negotiations: the first one in 2015 and the second one ongoing as of November 2025.

The talks between Turkey and the PKK, however, have relied almost entirely on domestic dynamics. Although the 2015 peace talks, also known as the “Kurdish Opening,” were launched in Oslo, they only became public after leaked voice recordings of the talks surfaced. For decades, Turkey has regarded negotiation as unnecessary, as it has one of NATO’s largest armies, which has favored the military option over a peaceful solution and weakened diplomatic channels.

Furthermore, the army’s role in Turkish politics until the 2000s seriously limited the capacity of politicians to pursue a peace agenda.

From the very first moment that the peace talks which ended in 2015, revealed to the public¹¹, they were criticized as a vote-grabbing attempt by Erdoğan and his party rather than a genuine peace process. Turkey’s peace talks with the PKK began under Erdoğan’s single-man rule. In this sense, it's not possible to talk about a political environment that rival political parties engaged in pitting tactics against each other, as was the case in Sri Lanka. Hence, the peace talks reached a certain stage despite heavy criticism from the opposition, particularly Turkish nationalist parties¹². The factors that brought the peace talks to an end include the decline of Erdoğan in voter polls, which was contrary to his predictions¹³. Another factor was the PKK's reluctance to embrace Erdoğan's policies in Rojava and Syria. While the Syrian issue holds geopolitical significance for Turkey, it has also been labeled a personal "cause" for Erdoğan.

The second peace talk, which began in 2025, is also related to the transformation and regime change in Syria. Just as 9/11 altered the fate of the Sri Lankan and LTTE conflicts, the October 7 attacks by HAMAS which can be considered the 9/11 of the Middle East, and the regime change in Syria have directly impacted relations between the PKK and Turkey. It is fair to say the developments in Syria may directly affect the peace talks between Turkey and the PKK.

What Does It Mean for the Peace Process?

Analyzing both cases together, it is fair to point out that LTTE collapsed mainly because it locked itself into a sole-military structure, one leader, one strategy, and almost no political line. Once Prabhakaran refused the PTD and the LTTE failed to interpret the post-9/11 global order, no options were left but to lock itself into a rigid position. That rigidity and plain strategy opened new doors for Colombo to isolate and eventually defeat the LTTE.

In the case of the PKK, the creation of functional institutions such as the Presidential Council, convening congresses under even heavy Turkish bombardment, and the wide civil society and political network around the Kurdish community and beyond provided the PKK room to develop a wide range of policies and strategies and diplomatic channels alongside constructive language and a strategic position in Turkey's political landscape. Institutional flexibility is important because it allows for a leader who can respond to unexpected circumstances and gain international prestige, which in turn leads to increased international support.

While Erdoğan initially hoped to gain more votes, the diminishing significance of elections and parliament over the years ultimately led to the peace talks in 2025. The one-man rule, weak institutional structures, and weak democracy that led to the LTTE's defeat, however, created the political atmosphere in Turkey that brought the second peace talks with the PKK. More specifically, less-democratic Turkey and Erdoğan's leadership, unconcerned with gaining votes and winning elections, found comfort in managing the negotiations with the PKK.

Conclusion

Unlike the Tamil case, the Kurdish issue remained an internal matter for Turkey. However, the PKK made a solid effort to make the Kurdish issue visible by organizing in countries where Kurds lived, particularly in Europe. While the LTTE ended with a definitive military defeat, the PKK had the advantage of preserving itself to the point of de jure disbandment after more than half a century of struggle.

The PKK's dissolution appears a victory for Turkey. However, the PKK's umbrella organization, Komara-Civaka-Kurdistan, remains in existence. The PKK never expanded its combat presence and administrative units beyond what it could manage. LTTE administered territories as a de facto-

state. Nevertheless, the LTTE failed to demonstrate the military skills required to govern a state¹⁴. Additionally, its antipathy derived from its unyielding stance in peace talks caused a cut-off of international funds.

Financial irregularities followed by a lack of funds caused disagreements within the LTTE. The PKK's rapid-reacting military structure has influenced its political wings. Unlike the LTTE's ambition to control Tamil political parties, the PKK's relationship with Kurdish political parties remained in a confederal style rather than a central authority. This approach encouraged Kurdish politicians to develop policies within Turkey's political landscape, putting them in a "special position" during elections. Apart from a few mid-level PKK commanders defecting in the 1990s, no significant splits have been observed, signifying that the decentralist structure actually strengthened organizational discipline.

In terms of military skills, the LTTE was the organization that "gifted" suicide attacks to military history. The LTTE rapidly evolved into a regular army with air, land, and sea forces. Nevertheless, the LTTE's military strength was also caused by the weakness of the Sri Lankan army. The Sri Lankan navy's cutoff of the sea supply line between the LTTE and India limited the LTTE's ability to receive financial and logistical support from the Indian-Tamil community. Considering the loss of 4,000 fighters and key supply routes, LTTE's insistence on conventional warfare was a strategic miscalculation¹⁵. The PKK, by contrast, minimized its

military losses against the Turkish army by avoiding static positions. That said, the PKK's urban warfare attempt against Turkey during 2015-17 was a miscalculation of the PKK, yet it should be regarded as an out runner of experience in urban warfare against ISIS in Northern Syria. Unlike the LTTE, which operated on an island battlefield with no viable escape routes other than by sea, the PKK is located in cross-border regions that allowed tactical dispersal. Moreover, the PKK enjoyed constructing tunnel networks for protection and logistical continuity.

Perhaps the geolocation of each organization affected its ability to analyze geopolitical developments. The PKK managed to survive, perhaps closely monitoring and learning lessons from regional conflicts in its region, such as the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, and the Syrian civil war. The LTTE, by contrast, remained isolated from military development in South Asia. The PKK has developed responses to the end of the Cold War and then to 9/11, not hesitating to change names and paradigms if necessary. The LTTE showed almost no reaction to the new world order, failing to develop policies. It is worth noting that the new order and enemy updates in the Middle East and the world have obliged Turkey to restart peace talks. Yet, dynamic policies developed by the PKK over fifty years led to the resumption of the peace process in 2025, and by formally dissolving itself, the PKK can claim victory in surviving through the years as it exits the battlefield.

References

1. Rasmi Raghav, "Why and How the Tamil Tiger Lost the Battle: LTTE Case Study," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 4, no.3 (2016), [Read More ↵](#)
2. Conciliation Resources, *Sri Lanka Primer*, Accord Programme Workshop: Engaging Armed Groups in Peace Processes, London, July 2004, [Read More ↵](#)
3. Fouâd Oveysy, *The PKK and Disarmament: Between Peace and Pacification* (2025), [Read More ↵](#)
4. Vahap Coşkun, "The Kurdish Peace Process: Oct. 6-8 Events and Beyond," *Dicle University* (2015), [Read More ↵](#)
5. Shantha Hattotuwa, "Overview of the Peace Process in Sri Lanka: 2002-2003," paper presented at the conference "Strengthening Cooperation and Security in South Asia—Post 9/11," Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Dhaka, 1-3 July 2003, [Read More ↵](#)
6. Dharman Wickremaratne, "132 Demonstrators Were Shot Dead and 712 Arrested During Island-Wide Protests Against the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 29th 1987," *dbsjeyaraj.com* (July 28, 2015), [Read More ↵](#)
7. Vinothini Kanapathipillai, "Whither Peace After the Polls?," *Tamil Guardian* (October 11, 2005), [Read More ↵](#)
8. *Daily FT*, "LTTE's Enforced Boycott in 2005 Led to Its Downfall in 2009" (August 30, 2023), [Read More ↵](#)
9. Tarun Hindwan, *Defeat of LTTE: A Lesson in COIN Operations*, Air Command and Staff College, Air University (2011), [Read More ↵](#)
10. S.Hattotuwa, "Overview of the Peace Process in Sri Lanka: 2002-2003," paper presented at the conference "Strengthening Cooperation and Security in South Asia—Post 9/11," Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Dhaka, 1-3 July 2003, [Read More ↵](#)

11. Cuma Çiçek and Vahap Coşkun, “The Peace Process from Dolmabahçe to Present-Day: Understanding Failure and Finding New Paths,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (2016), [Read More ↵](#)
12. International Crisis Group, *A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks*, Europe Briefing No.77 (2015), [Read More ↵](#)
13. Musa Akgül and Çiğdem Görgün Akgül, “Beyond Mutually Hurting Stalemate: Why Did the Peace Process in Turkey (2009-2015) Fail?,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2022), [Read More ↵](#)
14. Danielle Vella and Ameya Valcárcel, “Sri Lanka: Winning the War Does Not Mean Winning the Peace,” *NOREF* (2010), [Read More ↵](#)
15. Niel A. Smith, “Counterinsurgency Lessons from Sri Lanka,” *Joint Force Quarterly* (2010), [Read More ↵](#)



ABOUT

Nestled in the mountains of Sulaymaniyah, the Culture Capital of KRI, iNOV8 Research Center pioneers cutting-edge research and innovation. We aspire for excellence as an independent research center by providing valid, valuable, and timely products to the public. We deliver impactful solutions and contribute to our industry's vibrant and forward-thinking community.

ASYMMETRY AND AFTERMATH:THE PKK AND LTTE PEACE EXPERIENCES



CONTACT

CHANNEL8 BUILDING,
KURDSAT QTR, AS SULAYMANIYAH, IRAQ
+964 (0)770-608-8885
CONTACT@INNOV8.KRD