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Ending the LTTE: Recipe for counter-terrorism?

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Despite the very high cost in terms of lives lost and internal displacements, the military victory against the LTTE is a lesson in warfare for countries fighting insurgency and terrorism.

THE GROUND war in Sri Lanka is over now. The protracted ethnic conflict involving Tamils which was responsible for more than 70,000 fatalities, including civilian lives, appears to have reached an end. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), billed as the world's most ruthless and dangerous terrorist group, now stands decimated. Though some of the top leaders remain at large, like Selvarajah Pathmanathan -- the man behind LTTE's international supply and logistics network -- it would be difficult for the group to resurrect as a credible threat in near future.

A formidable adversary

How did this happen? Undoubtedly, LTTE was the most capable and lethal of the contemporary terrorist organisations in the world. It was also the most equipped with a standing army, dedicated maritime forces and assets and an air arm, the only terrorist group in the world to have all the three capabilities. Its suicide squad -- the Black Tigers -- was the most feared due to its brutality. LTTE's supply network encompassing weapons procurement and financing was one of the most robust and hence was a model for other groups. Until late 2008, LTTE was in de-facto control of one-third of Sri Lanka's territory where it ran a parallel administration. It had effective sea-control in the waters off Jaffna.

Apparently, a series of misadventures and misdemeanours on the part of the LTTE, including the assassination of the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the zero-sum mindset of its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, led to the downfall of the group. While the former act cost the group in terms of loss of sympathy and support from its most significant benefactor -- New Delhi, Prabhakaran's inflexibility and notoriety for deception and undependability weakened the foundations of the long-term survival of the group. Prabhakaran also underestimated the resolve of the Sri Lankan President Mahindra Rajapaksa's government. His conduct during the last stages of the peace process undermined the group and its cause before the international community which increasingly came to see it as unreliable.

Getting the act right

While LTTE was doing it all wrong, it would appear with hindsight that the Sri Lankan government was putting its act together in the right direction. Contrary to conventional practice, when most governments let their guard down during a ceasefire while insurgent groups re-build their capabilities, the Sri Lankan defence forces went on a massive recruitment and procurement drive, recruiting new soldiers and equipping them with advanced military hardware and training. Though military casualties were kept a closely guarded secret, there is no doubt that the Sri Lankan armed forces fought with unparalleled resoluteness, adapting the tactics of the rebels and bettering and surprising their adversary.

Second, exploiting the 2004 split in the group, the government managed to co-opt Karuna Amman, LTTE's commander for the eastern areas. Karuna enjoyed extensive following among fellow Tamils, the support of which was lost to LTTE. Significantly, LTTE also lost one of its most important sources of recruitment which proved fatally damaging.

Diplomacy as a weapon

Third, the government used diplomacy to undermine undercurrents of sympathy and support for the LTTE abroad. Part of the initiative was to engage the countries, notably the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Australia, where the LTTE had strong pockets of support among the Tamil diaspora. Once the LTTE was proscribed as a terrorist organisation after 9/11, the sympathy for the group nosedived. This loss of diaspora support was quite debilitating for the LTTE both financially and morally. Colombo also enlisted the direct support of key countries, especially China and Israel, for procurement of military hardware including communication and surveillance systems. Beijing also kept the heat off Colombo's back in the international fora.

Destroying enemy's supply line

Fourth, when hostilities broke out, the government went in for full-scale multi-pronged offensives against the group. While the ground forces made painful advances to reclaim territory from LTTE's control, its navy and the air force, equipped with intelligence provided by some friendly countries, targeted the supply infrastructure of the group. Between March and October 2007, the defence forces were able to destroy as many as nine LTTE merchant vessels which were the mainstay of the group's supply infrastructure. As a result, the group was not in a position to recoup the loss of its weapons and armaments, which undermined its resistance and the ability to prolong the fight.

Wooing the neighbour

Fifth, Colombo took extreme care to engage New Delhi and enlist its support. This was very important as India's reactions could have tipped the scale one way or the other. Because of domestic considerations, especially in the Tamil-dominated state of Tamil Nadu, there is an inevitable concern for the welfare of Tamils in Sri Lanka with acute political and social ramifications. In the past, such concerns have resulted in what is dubbed as New Delhi's interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs. In fact, it would have been difficult, for Colombo to launch an offensive, endangering the lives of the Tamil civilians, without the tacit acquiescence or at least, silence on the part of India.

It appears that the Sri Lankan government handled this quite adroitly through open channels of communication encompassing India's military, diplomatic and intelligence establishments. There was also transparency, especially involving issues of weapons procurement and military deployments and person-to-person contacts. Colombo was also willing to address issues which were of immediate consequence for the government led by the Indian National Congress, whose leader Rajiv Gandhi was a victim of LTTE's brutality.

For example, Sri Lanka declared that it was halting the use of heavy artillery in the no-fire zone to minimise civilian casualties. Though Colombo's credibility in keeping to this promise is still being debated, the gesture was sufficient to assuage feelings in India, which otherwise could have had grave repercussions in the recently-concluded Indian elections. As a senior Sri Lankan government official remarked, it made sense to expend diplomacy on its immediate neighbour, as India had a significant stake in the conflict.

Uncertainty despite victory

The battlefield victory against the LTTE does not mean that the Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka is over. It has come at a very high cost in terms of lives lost, internal displacements and damage to property. The Sri Lankan government still has to win hearts due to perceived chauvinism of the majority Sinhalese. Colombo has a long way to go to restore confidence and normalcy in the Tamil areas ravaged by more than three decades of civil war. It is uncertain whether Colombo's military triumph will lead to peace or mark a turn to guerilla warfare by the LTTE.

Nevertheless, the military victory against the LTTE is a lesson in warfare for countries with similar conflicts. This is especially so for those whose counter-terrorism efforts are being complicated by the support given to their domestic terrorists by outside forces. As Sri Lanka has demonstrated, it is possible to turn around a difficult war into victory.

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