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Military Defeat of the Tamil Tigers: From Velvet Glove to Iron Fist

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The prevalent wisdom in Counterinsurgency (COIN) theory is that the 'Iron-Fisted' approach to defeating insurgencies is counter-productive. The recent success of the Sri Lanka Armed Forces (SLAF) suggests that under the right conditions, a decisive battlefield victory is possible. But will this translate into an enduring resolution?

RECENT PROTRACTED insurgencies in Afghanistan, the Caucasus and Iraq seem to suggest that military action simply does not address the underlying political, economic or social causes that fuel the conflicts. Recent events in Sri Lanka however appear to challenge that fundamental assumption.

In an unrelenting military offensive over the past three years, the SLAF has eliminated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as an organised military fighting force and decapitated its leadership. How did Sri Lanka manage to secure a military victory that is proving so elusive to the coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq? The answer can be found in Sri Lanka's ability to dominate the 'battle-space' in the strategic, operational and information domains.

Strategic Goals and Strategic Partners

At the strategic level, there was a clear, coherent goal which the Sri Lankan government was able to conceive, rationalise, project and pursue with relentless consistency – an all out offensive to eliminate the LTTE as a military threat. Despite calls from certain quarters of the international community for restraint, the Sri Lankan government was able to stick to its 'A Plan'. Tacit support from India certainly strengthened the already firm resolve of the political and military leadership to see the military offensive through to its logical end.

When United States military aid was suspended to Sri Lanka in 2007, it found a new friend in China. Recent transfers of Chinese military equipment in the form of naval vessels, fighter aircraft, armour, heavy artillery, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and small arms have given the SLAF much needed tools denied by the West on humanitarian grounds. Online defence forums have suggested that Chinese-made HJ-8 ATGMs were extremely effectively in taking out LTTE defensive structures.

Israeli military assistance, though present, has not been significant compared to that from the Chinese.

Indeed, Chinese financial backing of the new multi-billion-dollar Hambantota deep-water port in Southern Sri Lanka stands as a testament to the new strategic relationship between China and Sri Lanka. What the West threatens to withhold, China now provides at 'friendship' prices.

Explaining Operational Success

At the operational level, Sri Lanka was able to wrest the initiative away from the LTTE as the military campaign progressed. In its 26-year fight against the LTTE, the SLAF rarely got the LTTE to fight a decisive military campaign on its terms. However, since 2004, splits within the LTTE movement and defections to the government side severely eroded the military leadership of the Tamil Tigers. When the Sri Lankan military took the fight to the LTTE strongholds, the Tamil Tigers could no longer employ the advantage of asymmetry, but were forced into defensive actions to hold on to their rapidly-diminishing territory.

The struggle to hold ground ultimately became conventional battles of attrition in which the numerical and firepower superiority of the SLAF became telling. The capture of the strategically vital Elephant Pass effectively hemmed in the LTTE to a restricted pocket on the north-eastern coast. As the ring grew tighter, the SLAF was able to pull-off a textbook 'Cannae' – the paradigmatic battle of encirclement and annihilation. In short, the final battles that sealed the fate of the LTTE as a fighting force seem to demonstrate that military-centric means can work in COIN.

Salience of the Information Space

One of the key factors that enabled the success of Sri Lanka's military campaign is the ability of the government to dominate the information space. Contrary to the 'global insurgencies' in Iraq and Afghanistan, the LTTE's armed struggle was of local proportions (geographically, politically, operationally, perceptively and as portrayed by the mainstream media). By localising the conflict yet further, the Sri Lankan government was able to control the dissemination of its images.

Unlike Israel's recent Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, there was no proliferation of videos on Youtube depicting alleged human rights abuses to viscerally shock and play on the conscience of global netizens. Unlike their network-centric Western counterparts operating in Iraq or Afghanistan, the average Sri Lankan soldier belongs to the industrial rather than the information age. He does not go into the area of operations (AO) accompanied by a helmet-cam, iPod or iPhone taking and sharing videos that might negatively affect the strategic picture or at the very least cause a public relations disaster.

Most importantly, the Sri Lankan government was able to keep the international press out of the conflict areas and control the flow of images. As a corollary, the SLAF operated in an insulated information bubble -- free from the interference of journalists who might otherwise undermine military operations.

Images that eventually emerged were of flag-waving Colombo residents and an effigy of David Miliband, the British Foreign Secretary, going up in smoke -- defiant signals to anyone who wishes to take their war-winning leaders to task for human rights violations. Firm comments such as "Our president will tell the UN secretary general we did the right thing - to finish the war off" were prevalent views held by the Sinhalese majority. In short, the Sri Lankan government was able to capitalise on the groundswell of Sinhalese opinion staunchly in favour of the military option.

There is no question that the Sri Lankan government's efforts to dominate if not control the local information battle-space have been immensely successful. The information 'firewall' that shrouded the

physical battle zone was instrumental if not crucial to military victory.

Cannae or Pyrrhic Victory?

With the LTTE formally renouncing its armed struggle in favour of non-violent activism, the combat phase for both sides is now at an end. It remains to be seen, however, whether this constitutes a genuine transformation of the LTTE into a civil-rights movement, or simply means the LTTE buying time and space to resurrect its armed struggle in other forms. The Sri Lankan government has claimed the laurels of military victory, but this can easily prove to be a pyrrhic victory if no attempt is made to engage its war-ravaged Tamil minority.

Sustained meaningful contact between the Sri Lankan government and its Tamil constituents is necessary to establish the conditions for an enduring resolution. If the long history of protracted insurgencies tells us anything, it is that military coercion works only in extremely limited and localised conditions. Indeed, the fruits of military victory are often temporal and bitter if the underlying tumours of conflict are left to fester. On the other hand, the restoration of security and civil life in the physical and psychological realms of the conflict zone serve to create a better if not lasting peace.

The military historian, Corelli Barnett remarked: “War is the great auditor of institutions.” How will Sri Lanka emerge from this audit? Will the military defeat of the LTTE be enshrined as a glorious last stand by future generations of Tamil militants, or will it be defined as a reconciliatory ‘ground-zero’?

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