

Strategic Miscalculation by the LTTE

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By Shanaka Jayasekara

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Currently, Sri Lanka is at the threshold of being the second example of an absolute victory over a terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The defeat of the LTTE is much a success of the Sri Lankan military as it is a grave miscalculation by the LTTE.

The beginnings of the collapse can be traced to changes in LTTE strategy from 2004 onwards. In October 2004, a delegation of the LTTE headed by Suppayya Pramu Tamilselvan undertook a month long tour of Europe and held high level meeting with senior officials of Foreign Ministries in ten European countries. The meetings were arranged by Norwegian diplomats in each of these countries.

The LTTE had by this stage undergone a paradigm shift in thinking, after many years of pursuing a military strategy; they had come to believe the next phase towards statehood was the progressive achievement of international acceptance. The LTTE believed direct diplomatic access in Europe had paved the way for “Proto-State” status in the corridors of Western powers.

The LTTE for the first time had shifted from power broking in Tamil Nadu politics as the means to pressure Sri Lanka, to building a more ambitious Western led diplomatic offensives against the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE were either misinformed by the influx of Diaspora advisers or were under an illusion that access to Foreign Ministries equated to a foreign policy shift on Sri Lanka. It is likely that it was a combination of both, over-ambitious Diaspora advisers and LTTE delegations flattered by overseas experiences.

At the time, the LTTE considered primary obstacle to greater international acceptance was the UNP links (Ranil-Moragoda) with the liberal-conservative side of politics globally. The former LTTE ideologue Late Anton Balasingham accused the UNP of building a global safety net to the detriment of the LTTE.

At the Presidential elections in November 2005 the candidates of the two main political parties had taken very different positions on the path to a

political solution to the conflict. The UNP candidate Ranil Wickremasignhe in his manifesto stated, he will pursue a political settlement based on the Oslo Communiqué to explore a federal solution. (pages 16 & 17 UNP Peoples manifesto).

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The LTTE had control of the Vanni region in the Northern Province and capability to influence the Jaffna peninsula. The primary objective of the LTTE was to achieve diplomatic parity and the main obstacle was the Ranil-Moragoda connections.

The LTTE had become over confident of its military capabilities and was ambitiously pursuing a strategy of diplomatic successes. Towards this end, the LTTE had already assassinated former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, thereby creating a dearth of internationally recognized personalities in the SLFP/JVP coalition.

The LTTE were convinced that they would be favored over a SLFP/JVP coalition Presidency by the international community and this provided a better chance of achieving a level of legitimacy for the organization.

Realizing that UNP candidate Ranil Wickremasignhe may win the Presidential elections if the minority Tamils voted, the LTTE imposed a complete boycott of the Presidential elections in the Northern Province. As reported in the EU Election Observer Mission Report (Nov 2005), the LTTE successfully enforced a total boycott of the elections in areas controlled by them.

The final results of the Presidential elections, Mahinda Rajapaksa received 4,887,152 votes and Ranil Wickremasignhe 4,706,366. The SLFP/JVP candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa won the Presidential elections by 180,786 votes. The registered voters in the Northern Province that were prevented from voting by the LTTE exceed 400,000 persons.

As Sun Tzu in his book, Art of War writes "the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself". Indeed the LTTE being over confident of its military capabilities had grossly miscalculated strategy. It blatantly disregarded the capacity of the Sri Lankan state to mobilize a military campaign, and banked on Diaspora advice for a diplomatic offensive against Sri Lanka .

The LTTE began mounting an international diplomatic campaign was gaining ground following the collapse of the Geneva peace talks, the cancellation of the Millennium Challenge grants, Senator Leahy amendment restricting military assistance, loss of seat at the Human Rights Committee and the EU GSP+ coming under scrutiny, demonstrated the international strengths of LTTE activists . At this crucial stage Anton Balasingham the only accurate representation of the LTTE outside Sri Lanka died in December 2006. It was Anton Balasingham that acted as the channel of communication for the LTTE with foreign governments. To the LTTE he was indispensable, in fact officials of the EU and several other governments traveled to London regularly to meet with Balasingham. The LTTE had no replacement for Balasingham and the ambitious diplomatic victories fast faded out.

The LTTE strategy had not factored the arrival of Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the United States, the elder brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Gotabaya a retired Colonel in the Sri Lanka Army actively participated in the battles of Vaddamarachchi in 1987. Gotabaya assumed office as Secretary of Defence and set about a strategy for the elimination of the LTTE drawing on his own experience on the battlefield.

The "Gotabaya Strategy" was three pronged; the first priority was to enhance the manpower strength of the military. Between 2006-2008 the security forces expanded by 70,000 soldiers and the auxiliary civil defense force by 40,000 persons.

The second element of the strategy was to destroy the weapons supply capability of the LTTE. In this regard the Navy played a pivotal role by destroying almost the entire shipping fleet of the LTTE. The Navy targeted these floating armories in international waters sinking seven large merchant vessels operated by the LTTE. The third element of the strategy was closer cooperation between the three armed forces. In the absence of a structured coordination process, Gotabaya used his personal relationships with senior commanders of the three services to ensure effective coordination at the operational level.

When the LTTE blocked the Mavil Aru reservoir in July 2006 preventing irrigation and water supply to rice fields downstream, the government was ready to use military force to evict the LTTE from the Eastern Province. The defection of LTTE Eastern leader Karuna had factionalized the LTTE in the Eastern Province. The security forces after one year of battle had totally liberated the Eastern Province with the final battle of Thoppigala in July 2007. In February 2008, the security forces embarked on clearing the Northern Province, commencing with the battle of Madhu Church.

Security Forces pursued a strategy of capturing coastline on the North Western and Eastern coast.. This strategy of progressing along the coast prevented the LTTE from landing supplies, limited the operational space for the Sea Tigers and prevented and outflow of refugees to India.

The Army had established several offensive divisions which spearheaded the forward thrust, while defensive divisions were tasked with consolidation newly liberated territory.

The Army adopted innovative battlefield strategies that out maneuvered the LTTE defences. Special Forces teams actively operated in enemy territory disrupting the mobility of the LTTE.

In ten months the security forces had reached northern most town of Pooneryn on the western flank and had come almost to Mullaitivu on the Eastern flank. The three main offensive divisions were supplemented with additional manpower strength by establishing three more semi-strength divisions. At the time of the Kilinochchi battle three full divisions and three semi-strength divisions (Task Force) were positioned for attack from six directions.

The Gotabaya Strategy of crippling the weapons supplies had prevented the LTTE from replenishing ammunition stocks. The LTTE could not prevent the advance of the security forces due to a serious shortage of ammunition. The LTTE had expected to receive a consignment of weapons which they procured in July 2008 from Ukraine. However, only one trawler load managed to breach the naval cordon and reach the coast at Mullaitivu. This consignment helped the LTTE stall the military advance for a short period resisting the fall of Kilinochchi.

This was when LTTE sympathetic defence writers suggested that Kilinochchi was the “battle of Stalingrad” and the LTTE elite fighting units will reverse the battlefield fortunes.

However, with six flanks closing in on the LTTE, the defences at Paranthan north of Kilinochchi collapsed (01 January 2009) following a string of attacks by the security forces the LTTE was evicted from their prestigious stronghold of Kilinochchi (02 January 2009) considered the de-facto capital of the LTTE. After the LTTE defenses at Elephant Pass collapsed (08 January 2009) two additional divisions stationed in the Jaffna peninsula reached the battle ground on the mainland.

At present, one division (55 Division) is moving south from the Jaffna peninsula, three full divisions (57 Division, 58 Division & 59 Division) and three semi-strength divisions (Task Force 2, 3, & 4) are positioned from the south and south-east.

A four ring Naval cordon is positioned off the coast of Mullaitivu. The

Security Forces entered Mullaitivu (25 January 2009), the last major town held by the LTTE. The LTTE had constructed several underground command & control facilities, fuel dumps and ordnance factories in areas surrounding Mullaitivu, all of which have now been captured by the Security Forces. The capture of the 67,000 litre diesel storage facility at Dharmapuram has caused an acute mobility problem for the LTTE and power shortages for communication equipment.

The LTTE has retained the hardcore fighters for the final battle. However, the manpower strength of 4 Divisions and 3 semi-strength Divisions approaching on seven flanks is more than what the depleted LTTE can resist.

Military Position as at 29 January 2009



As the government continues to encircle the LTTE, the civilian population that has been displaced due to the conflict which numbers around 200,000 persons will need to be protected.

According to Human Rights Watch Report titled "Trapped and Mistreated" December 2008, the LTTE is using the displaced population as a human shield and preventing them from leaving LTTE territory.

The Government has demarcated a Civilian Safe Zone and have air dropped leaflets informing the populations to move to this area. The government will need to take extra precautions to minimise civilian casualties, especially be cautious of deceptive LTTE intelligence that could

result in an embarrassing humanitarian debacle for the government.

Territory Controlled by the LTTE



The survival of the LTTE is completely dependent on the survival of its elusive leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE is structured around an all powerful leader to whom all must take an oath of allegiance, and has no second-in-command. Therefore, the elimination or exile of Prabhakaran will create a power vacuum among the key commanders all of whom are of equal rank in the organization. There is a strong likelihood that elimination of Prabhakaran could splinter and factionalize the LTTE with key commanders operating independently of each other.

In the current situation the fate of Prabhakaran can take three scenarios. The contracting territory of the LTTE will make Prabhakaran more vulnerable. In fact over the last few weeks the human and technical intelligence on LTTE movements has increased several fold.

On 12 January 2009, a former bodyguard of Prabhakaran was captured by the security forces and two underground hideouts of Prabhakaran were targeted with bunker-buster bombs.

Therefore, the first scenario is that improved intelligence may lead to a

surgical air or ground strike killing Prabhakaran in the next few weeks.

The second scenario is Prabhakaran fleeing into exile.

The Tamil diaspora has been actively attempting to facilitate Prabhakaran's escape from Sri Lanka. It is possible that Prabhakaran may attempt to seek refuge in a South East Asian country. It is suspected that LTTE weapons procurement chief Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP) for whom several INTERPOL arrests warrants have been issued lives safely in South East Asia. Therefore, it is plausible that Prabhakaran be transported clandestinely to a South East Asian destination.

The Tamil diaspora is of the view that Prabhakaran even in exile can provide inspirational leadership to remaining elements of the movement locally and overseas.

The third scenario is a mutiny within the LTTE in which Prabhakaran is killed by one of his own commanders. It is possible that some commanders and combatants may contemplate a life after LTTE. Already, the security forces are making overtures to senior LTTE commanders to defect. The success story of Karuna as a head of political party and now a member of Parliament may be viewed as incentives for defection.

Whatever the fate of Prabhakaran, the LTTE as a conventional force has been completely annihilated. The LTTE will no longer control territory and not have the capacity to launch conventional style battles again. It is possible that factional and splinter groups may reorganize themselves as guerrilla outfits attempting to engage in internecine attacks to destabilize the Northern Province. The most likely scenario is that the international network of the LTTE which remains active and strong will continue the battle for Tamil Eelam in exile.

They will follow the same path as the Khalistan groups which have an active Diaspora movement but do not have a commensurate local military campaign.

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