

The Sri-Lankan Experience in the Use of Air Power against the LTTE in Subduing the Maoists Insurgency

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Introduction

Sri Lanka experienced a long civil war borne out of ethnic strife between two communities, the Tamils and Sinhalese. Through the 1960s, various Tamil groups started demanding a separate Tamil state or Eelam. This led to the formation of various outfits such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and TNT (Tamil New Tigers) which later metamorphosed into the well-known Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE was formed on 5 May 1976, under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran. It was one of the most lethal, controlled and disciplined terrorist organisation in the world. The main aim of the LTTE was to create a separate homeland for the Tamils known as the Tamil Eelam (State) in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The LTTE was organised along a two-tier structure: a military wing and a political wing which was subordinate to the military wing. A central governing committee, headed by the LTTE chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran was the overall head of both wings. The LTTE had its own military, air and naval wings.

The civil war raged from 1983 when the "First Eelam War" as called by the LTTE started, till 2009 when the Sri Lankan armed forces were able to defeat the LTTE.¹ In comparison, in India, the Maoist insurgency which is being experienced in numerous states is not classified as a civil war – but a law and order problem as of now. The commonality between these two conflicts is that both conflicts are internal conflicts involving their citizens who are aggrieved, and there is and was a use of armed force by both sides.

The degree to which force is being applied in the Indian context is much lesser than in the Sri Lankan case as the Maoists have not yet been able to muster an army as well equipped as the LTTE. The Indian armed forces are still to be directly involved in the insurgency operations. At present, they are only supporting the Central and State police forces. The Sri Lankan armed forces launched numerous operations against the LTTE, employing all its forces.

Air Power was also used during the Sri Lankan civil war, not only by the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) but was also employed by the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) from 29 July 1987 to 24 March 1990, when the Indian Air Force formed a part of the IPKF operations in Sri Lanka. The IPKF was inducted into Sri Lanka as mandated by the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. The role of the IPKF slowly changed from peace keeping to peace enforcement. It would, therefore, be best to understand how Air Power was utilised by both countries in Sri Lanka and see whether there are any lessons which can be drawn for utilising Air Power against the Maoists in India.

Air Power in Sri Lanka

The main aircraft which participated in the IPKF operations were Antonov AN-32s, Mi-8 and Mi-25 helicopters, Indian Army and Navy Chetaks and Cheetahs and the Indian Navy Alize aircraft. The first action carried out by the IAF was during Operation Poomalai in which five AN 32 aircraft, escorted by Mirage 2000 fighters dropped food supplies to the besieged Tamils of northern Jaffna. During this operation, AN-32 aircraft maintained a continuous air link from air bases in Southern India to Sri Lanka, transporting men, equipment, rations and evacuating casualties on the outbound flights.² Helicopters were used to support the Indian Army in their operations and formed a lifeline for the field forces as well as providing air transportation to Sri Lankan civil administration during the elections. Mi-25s were utilised to provide suppressive fire against LTTE strong points and to interdict coastal and clandestine riverine traffic.³

The SLAF supported the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) by providing them with logistic and close air support – flying intelligence, surveillance / reconnaissance, search and rescue missions and access to denied areas.⁴ It also carried out extensive bombing of the LTTE training camps, Sea Tiger bases and vessels and communication towers.⁵ The SLAF also supported the SLA in numerous joint operations by bombing LTTE positions. In 1997, the SLAF flew over 20,000 hours operationally, logging 21,895 hours. From May 1997 to 1999, the SLAF participated in Operation Jayasikurui in which Kfir jets flew 232 missions, MI-24 attack helicopters flew 127 missions and the Pucaras counterinsurgency ground attack aircraft flew 13 missions.⁶ Other aircraft which participated in the war were the Chinese Yun-12 turboprop transport aircraft equipped with bomb racks that had been fitted to carry up to 1,000 kilograms of fragmentation and anti-personnel bombs, Bell helicopters and MI 24 attack helicopters. The important lessons learnt in utilising Air Power by both countries against the LTTE are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Political will is paramount for exploiting Air Power gainfully. In any internal conflict, the use of Air Power is always restricted by political will. During the early years of Operation Pawan, the use of offensive Air Power was restrained to ensure no civilian casualties. However, with an increase in the aggressiveness by the LTTE, armed helicopters were inducted into the battle. It was only after an escalation in the belligerence of the LTTE in 2005 that the Sri Lankan government permitted Air Power to be used more offensively and even purchased offensive air platforms such as the Mi-24 attack helicopter, MiG-27 fighter and Kfir aircraft for employment against the LTTE.

Joint planning and briefing are a pre-requisite for the success of any joint operation. The Jaffna University Heliborne Operation (11 and 12 October 1987) was one of the major joint operations conducted by the army and air force elements of the IPKF. It would appear that adequate joint planning and briefing were not carried out prior to the Jaffna operation. There was even an ambiguity in the landing zone planned and marked on maps.⁷

Induction of troops is fastest when air assets are employed. In a bid to augment troops in Sri Lanka, in just two days (15 and 16 October 1987) three brigades and heavy equipment, including T-72 tanks and BMP-1 infantry combat vehicles were airlifted into Sri Lanka. As per estimates from 11 to 31 October 1987, 2,200 tactical transport and 800 assault helicopter sorties were carried out towards inducting troops, weapons, vehicles, stores and various other equipment into Sri Lanka by the IAF.⁸

Air effort available should be commensurate with the planned task. The Jaffna Operation required four MI-8

helicopters to transport 480 troops with a restriction of only 20 troops per lift. The time estimated to induct this force was over one hour. The air effort provided was insufficient to transport the troops so as to ensure that they could concentrate in force and be self-supporting, thereby being able to be effective in battle.⁹

Air assets must have some kind of fire capability when participating in hostile territory. In the Jaffna operation, self-defence and offensive capability was sacrificed by the MI-8s to ensure that the maximum number of troops could be carried in every sortie. No armament was carried by the MI-8 helicopters even though rockets were available in sufficient numbers. Thus the helicopters were unable to return fire when they came under heavy ground fire.¹⁰

Helicopters need aerial protection during landing and take-off phases. The helicopters came under heavy ground fire during this operation. In subsequent operations, MI-25 helicopters were utilised to provide escort to heliborne operations and also lay down suppressive fire. This tactic was gainfully used while landing at remote unreconnoiled landing zones.

Secure communication ensures surprise and secrecy of plans. The LTTE had been forewarned regarding the Jaffna raid by the IPKF by VHF Radio interception and were prepared for the raid.

Aerial surveillance and reconnaissance provides valuable intelligence. Inputs from photo reconnaissance missions were able to provide valuable intelligence for the conduct of ground operations. Aerial photo mosaics were used for planning operations as no other accurate maps were available.¹¹ During the Jaffna University operations, one of the major reasons for its failure was the lack of intelligence regarding the strength of the LTTE.¹² This could have been overcome by continuous aerial surveillance.

Adversary's Air Defence threats should not be ignored. The SLAF lost a number of aircraft to SAM-7s used by the LTTE. They lost two HS-748, two AN-32 and one Y-8 aircraft. These attacks on the SLAF led to the irreplaceable loss of 95 personnel on board the aircraft which included 15 pilots and nine Flight Engineers.

Air assets are vulnerable to attack on ground and need to be protected. The SLAF lost one Y-12, two Kfir, three K-8, one MiG-27 aircraft and two Mi-17 helicopters when they were destroyed by LTTE raids on air bases.¹³

Air Power has a tremendous psychological effect on ground forces. Offensive air support provided by attack helicopters had a tremendous positive psychological effect on the ground forces, while it intimidated the LTTE. Escorts provided by attack helicopters to MI-8 helicopters, landing troops at remote helipads, was morale boosting. On the other hand, the success of LTTE ground raids in destroying SLAF aircraft coupled with the shooting down of SLAF aircraft was a reason for low morale of SLAF personnel.¹⁴

The Maoist Insurgency and Air Power

The Maoist insurgency, although has some commonality with the civil war of Sri Lanka, it is mainly different with respect to the level of fire power being used by the Naxals and the Security Forces. The relevant lessons that can be gleaned from the Sri Lankan experience regarding the use of Air Power and applied in the Indian context in subduing this insurgency are brought out in subsequent paragraphs.

Political Will. The Government of India was initially not inclined to use Air Power against the insurgency. The Home Minister of India had remarked, "At present there is no mandate to use the air force or any aircraft. But, if necessary, we will have to revisit the mandate to make some changes."¹⁵ As of now, the Cabinet Committee on Security headed by the Prime Minister has cleared the use of these helicopters only for casualty evacuation, troop mobility and other logistic roles. Helicopters have not been permitted to be used in the offensive role. With the insurgents becoming more offensive and bold, there is a need to revisit this mandate again and use Air Power more offensively in a pre-planned and controlled manner to ensure minimal civilian casualties.

Quantum of Air Effort. Operation Triveni initially started with two Mi-17 helicopters, increasing to six.¹⁶ This operation was initially conceived to cover Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, and has recently been broadened to include Odisha, Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.¹⁷ Till 31 March 2012, a total of 2492 hours in 3602 sorties had been flown in support of anti-Naxal operations,¹⁸ working out to an average of just 25 hours per helicopter, per month. This paucity of air effort is magnified with the poor serviceability state of BSF helicopters. Presently, the Dhruv helicopters of the BSF have been grounded owing to various maintenance related problems, while its Mi-17 fleet of six helicopters also has a poor serviceability rate due to the unavailability of spares.¹⁹ Six IAF helicopters are required to provide air support to nine states, a ratio which speaks for itself. Hence, the employment of Air Power in anti-Naxal operations is negligible as compared to the effort which is required. Employment of air assets is superficial. Air operations in support of the ground forces need to be quantitatively increased.

Protection of Air Assets on Ground. Anti-Naxal air operations are undertaken from civil airfields and also from CRPF camps. Though our security forces are proficient and fully prepared in protecting air assets on ground, it would be prudent in not over-estimating our own capabilities while underestimating the will and determination of the Maoists. Air bases in states affected by the insurgency need to be protected from a suicidal ground attack by the Maoists.

Protection of Helicopters. In the past, the Maoists have shot at helicopters flying in support of the security forces. ²⁰ In the latest incident on 18 January 2013, the Maoists were successful in shooting an Air Force MI-17 helicopter, forcing it to land. Rules of Engagement permit the IAF to retaliate, but only in self-defence. For this, the Mi-17 helicopters have been modified with sideways firing machine guns. This gun is manned by a trained Garud commandos of the IAF. Even though the insurgents have fired on IAF helicopters, the question that needs to be answered is: How many times were the Garuds able to return fire in self-defence? The task given to the security forces of sanitising helipads is easier said than done, as has been the experience in the past. The solution may lie in providing another helicopter to fly as an escort and if required lay down suppressive fire to deter the Maoists from taking pot shots at

helicopters in the final phases of arrival or departure.

Air Defence Threat. Anticipating the use of Air Power, the insurgents have trained their cadres in aspects of air defence. They have mastered facets of passive air defence and are also training for active air defence. The Maoists' air defence syllabus includes passive air defence topics on camouflage and concealment, dispersal techniques, targeting aircraft with LMGs, small weapons, etc. They have been trained for firing against a moving airborne target, evident from the attacks on Indian Air Force helicopters. Though the Maoists have not fired at the helicopters with rockets yet, intelligence inputs indicate that they are in possession of a crude rocket which may be used in the future with much more devastating results than machine gun fire. This threat from the Maoists brings out the importance of protecting our airborne assets.

Conclusion

In the past, Air Power has been used extensively to quell insurgencies. The British used Air Power in Malaya in 1945 while the French used it in Algeria in 1954. The Sri Lankan experience of using Air Power in its ethnic civil war has lessons for India. If Air Power is to be used against the insurgents; public opinion has to be moulded, about how Air Power is supporting the ground forces and ensuring that it is assisting in reducing the casualty rate of the ground forces. If public opinion can be correctly moulded, then numerous avenues for the use of Air Power would open up to the Government.

Endnotes

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16. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence 2011-12 quotes a figure of only four helicopters. However, as per open sources and interaction with personnel involved in anti-naxal operations, there are six IAF helicopters employed in Operation Triveni.
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20. In 2009, there were two separate incidents when IAF helicopters being utilised in election duties were fired at by the Maoists. In the first incident, a sergeant was shot in the head when the Maoist fired using AK-47 machine guns. Unconfirmed reports also indicate that there at least two more unreported incidents where-in Air Force helicopters were shot at in 2011. In April 2012, Maoists have been successful in shooting a civil Dhruv helicopter given to the Jharkhand government for anti naxal operations.

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