

Committing the Armed Forces Abroad

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Indian intervention abroad has been escalating over the years since 1947. In 1950, India gave asylum to the King of Nepal, and thereafter used its influence to ensure his return to the throne. On conclusion of the Korean War in 1953, an army brigade was placed at the disposal of the United Nations (UN) to supervise the return of Korean and Chinese prisoners of war. In 1957, a contingent participated in the UN Emergency Forces which kept the peace between Israel and Egypt. Again in 1961, a brigade served with the UN in the Congo. When China overran Tibet, India sent the Border Road Organisation to Bhutan to assist in the construction of their roads; a Military Training and Advisory Team was also established there. In 1971, the armed forces were employed to liberate East Pakistan and create Bangladesh. In 1987, and Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) went to Sri Lanka to assist in the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. In 1988, the armed forces were employed to frustrate an attempted coup in the Maldives.

Because of the success of the Maldives operation and the speed and efficiency with which this was launched and concluded, we are apt to learn false lessons about committing our armed forces abroad. In fact, historical records suggest that military interventions often seem tempting, but rarely work. Consider the US in Vietnam; Israel in Lebanon; Vietnam in Kampuchea; China in Vietnam; Libya in Chad; Turkey in Cyprus; Tanzania in Uganda; Somalia in Ethiopia; Iraq in Iran; the Soviets in Afghanistan; and our current situation in Sri Lanka.

"Un-enviable" is the mildest word which may be used to describe the predicament in which the men of the IPKF find themselves. The environment is hostile and the task thankless. The difficulties being faced are far greater than what the army was led to believe. The valour and dedication of our jawans and their officers have deservedly won them high praise from all, including President Jayewardene himself. Nevertheless, the time has come for us to ask: are there any checks on the powers of the Government of the day to commit the nation's armed forces abroad? Does a Government have any responsibility to account to the nation if the commitment proves to have been made ineptly? Neither question can be evaded now, after the Government sent the armed forces to Sri Lanka on 30 July 1987.

STRATEGIC LESSONS

There are four broad guidelines which planners ought to bear in mind

when committing our forces abroad. First, it is easier to make a decision to intervene militarily than to get out. Faulty assessments and arrogance can produce decisions to send troops to another country. Once there, pride and domestic as well as foreign pressures make it difficult and sometimes dangerous to withdraw. The US in Vietnam and Soviets in Afghanistan are classic cases. A fundamental change in US and Soviet leadership had to occur before either nation could disengage from interventions which were disastrous and prolonged. Second, it is easier to recruit and supply counter-insurgents than it is to control them, and easier to make weapons available than to determine how and by whom they will be used. It was Mrs. Indira Gandhi who had first supported Tamil Militants over a decade ago. This enabled the Tamils to oppose Sinhalese repression. But the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) now refuse to abide by the Agreement and lay down their arms. It was initially hoped that the IPKF would tame the Tigers (LTTE) within a matter of weeks. The IPKF is still a long way from that objective one year later, having lost 700 soldiers in the process.

Third, in an intervention, our "friends" are likely to be as big a problem as our adversaries. When a country intervenes to support a friendly one, the leaders of the government who invite such intervention, will often assert their independence in ways which conflict with the intervening country's policy interests. Foreign troops are soon looked upon as "occupiers". With presidential elections scheduled for mid-December in Sri Lanka, the situation has taken an ominous turn for India and the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The main candidates of the two political parties are both opposed to the Accord and the presence of 60,000 Indian troops on the island. Even allowing that much of this may be pre-election anti-Indian rhetoric, it will have to be admitted that "there is not a single Sinhalese today, however moderate or liberal, who does not believe that the IPKF is deliberately trying to avoid killing or capturing Tiger leader Prabhakaran. With him out of the way, the LTTE's back would be broken and that would possibly put pressure on the IPKF to stage a withdrawal...the Sinhala chauvinists say the '60 per cent of the coastline' is occupied by India while the moderates' version is that 'two out of nine provinces' are controlled by India."¹

Lastly, regional conflicts can be brought under control so far as the risk of their spreading is concerned, but resolving the initial causes for the conflicts is far more difficult. History has shown in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Lebanon and elsewhere, that intervention is rarely successful because it represents an outside effort that imposes political, cultural and social stability on forces which are too deep and strong for mere military power to have a permanent effect. Intervention may be successful when the cause of turmoil is itself superficial or external, and may then be remedied by a different application of force, as happened in the Maldives. But it is evident from the history

of the last decades that such instances are less common than intervening states perceive them to be.

THE INDO-SRI LANKA AGREEMENT

Anyway, the situation in Sri Lanka is not like the Maldives. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement was signed in Colombo on 29 July 1987, only a few days after President R. Venkataraman assumed office on 25 July. Provisions of the Agreement commit India to provide military assistance in terms which are not precise. India's commitment is not confined to imposing a cessation of hostilities but extends to implementing political proposals outline in the Agreement. Para 2. 14 states in very general terms: "The Government of India will underwrite and guarantee the resolutions and cooperate in the implementation of these proposals." Para 2. 16 is more specific concerning as it does the contingency "if any military groups operating in Sri Lanka do not accept this framework of proposals for a settlement." (The reader will note that this does not say "Tamil militant" groups.) Under Clause (c) of this Para, it says: "In the event that the Government of Sri Lanka requests the Government of India to afford military assistance to implement these proposals the Government of India will cooperate by giving to the Government of Sri Lanka such military assistance as and when necessary."

The provisions mentioned above figure in Para 6 of the Annexure to the Agreement which says that "in terms of Para 2. 14 and Para 2. 16 (c) of the Agreement, an Indian Peace Keeping Contingent may be invited by the President of Sri Lanka to guarantee and enforce the cessation of hostilities, if so required." The tentative wording "if so required", did not prepare the public for the despatch of the IPKF the very next day on 30 July. The net result is that India's commitment is not confined to enforcing a "cessation of hostilities" but extends to the "implementation of these proposals"; in short, till the very last step under them is taken. In fact, if the Sri Lanka Government finds it impossible to deal with its Sinhalese militants, it could, under Para 2. 16, ask the IPKF to deal with them.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Not surprisingly, the IPKF had hardly landed in Sri Lanka when confusion arose about its terms of duty and its command. On 31 July 1987, the Indian High Commissioner, Mr. J.N. Dixit said that the IPKF had been placed at the "disposal of President Jayewardene as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Sri Lanka." On 19 August 1987, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Mr. K. Natwar Singh said in the Rajya Sabha that the IPKF is under the President's command and would be withdrawn when he does not want them anymore. But the General Officer Commanding the IPKF, Major General Harkirat Singh, on 3 December 1987, was reported

to have said that "the Indian Army will not go from here till the Tamils are safeguarded and their aspirations are met." He also added, "We take orders from the Government of India".

Towards the end of 1987, criticisms about various aspects of the Agreement began to appear in the Indian press. The Chief of the Army Staff, General K.S. Sunderji, in Jaipur on 9 December 1987, justified the despatch of the army to Sri Lanka on the ground that it would ensure that there was no "unfriendly presence" in Sri Lanka. On 22 February 1988, the same reason was cited by Lieutenant General Depinder Singh, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Command, who was the overall commander of the IPKF. Their justification for the IPKF's presence in Sri Lanka is by itself of doubtful validity in the light of the provisions of the Agreement; their error is perhaps pardonable and symptomatic of the uncertainties prevailing at that time at all levels of command. Apart from this, there is still confusion on the chain of military command. These doubts are inexcusable because this is not the first time that the armed forces have been sent abroad for peace-keeping. In the past, both the terms of duty and the question of command were precisely defined.

The terms on which the Indian contingent participated in the UN Emergency Force which kept the peace between Israel and Egypt were defined in detail by an exchange of letters between the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and the Government of India. The chain of command and disciplinary powers at all levels were clearly laid down. Thus, when Prime Minister Nehru agreed to Mr. Hammarskjöld's subsequent request "to send Indian armed forces to the Congo", he had no difficulty in defining clearly in the Lok Sabha on 6 March 1961, the terms on which they would serve. In a purely bilateral accord such matters are, if anything, more easily and precisely resolved. Unfortunately, the language of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement reveals that this was concluded in haste.

CONSTITUTIONAL & OTHER CHECKS

Under the Constitution, the Union is vested with extensive legislative and executive powers in respect of defence, the armed forces and foreign affairs. No statute is necessary for the exercise of its powers except, as the Supreme Court put it, "when it is necessary to encroach upon private rights." The Army, Air Force and Navy Acts were enacted because exercise of disciplinary powers necessarily affects the rights of the personnel of the armed forces. But no statute exists which controls the Government's powers in respect of their deployment abroad. Unlike the US War Powers Act, which imposes duties of consultation and a six-day limitation on any presidential commitment of US troops abroad without Congressional approval, our Constitution has no statute which controls the Government's powers in respect of the

deployment of our armed forces abroad. Article 355 imposes on the Union the duty to protect India against external aggression. But this does not imply that the armed forces cannot be committed for duties abroad when there is no threat of aggression against the nation.

The Government's wide powers are exercised subject to only four checks: the Cabinet, Parliament, the President and Public Opinion. Given the ruling party's overall majority, the absence of an organised opposition party with a shadow cabinet, and the political climate in Delhi, Parliament and the Cabinet are unlikely to function as effective checks at this moment in time. The President can also be an independent check. Article 53(2) says that "the Supreme Command of the Defence Forces of the Union shall be vested in the President and the exercise thereof shall be regulated by law." This power is an adjunct to the President's responsibilities as constitutional head of the state. Under Article 78, the President is entitled, as Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces to ask questions and demand answers from the Prime Minister. President Rajendra Prasad's diaries show how he would summon not only the Defence Minister, Mr. Baldev Singh, but also the three service chiefs to discuss matters.

The last remaining check is public opinion. Significantly, criticisms of the Agreement and doubts expressed in the press about the tasks given to our troops, had provoked the ex-chief of Army Staff, General K.S. Sunderji to call for a "national consensus...as such doubts affect the morale of the men." Concern for the morale of our troops deserves respect. But military leaders in a democracy must accept that criticism of the Government's decision to commit the IPKF cannot and should not be stifled on that score when such criticism is warranted in the national interests. Therefore, more the need for a government to think very very carefully before committing its troops abroad. More the need for the three service chiefs to keep the Prime Minister, Defence Minister and President informed of the morale of their respective services whenever this is required.

THE GOVERNMENT'S DILEMMA

International reaction to India's intervention in the Maldives was overwhelmingly favourable. However, criticism of India's decision to respond to the Maldives President's call for help was quite severe in the Pakistani press which came out against any single country mounting such operations and suggesting that they be undertaken with the approval and under the aegis of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).² But the operation was appreciated by the American President who, in a message to the Prime Minister said, "We were impressed by your willingness to restore order without unnecessary bloodshed. I have no doubt that your action will be remembered as a valuable contribution to regional stability." A complimen-

tary message was also received from the Commonwealth Secretary-General who said, "The Commonwealth, and the wide world, was a better place today because you acted so promptly and effectively in the cause of world order, peace and stability in the Indian Ocean. Many a small country is today a safer place because of India's selfless action in turning back aggression in the Maldives."

No praise can be too high for the jawans and their officers who are operating in Sri Lanka. Today the LTTE is weakened but far from finished. The Army is unable to prevent it from laying land-mines which are taking a steady toll. Though Tamil civilians would rather have the Indian there than the Sri Lankan forces, the IPKF has apparently lost their sympathy. If the Sri Lankan Government is unable to control its Sinhalese militants, it may have no option but to ask the Army to stay. Moreover, New Delhi's dilemma is that if it pulls out now, it would lay itself open to charges that it is leaving the Tamils in the lurch, a situation that is made even more difficult with the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu due in the near future. yet, if the next Sri Lankan president asks the IPKF to leave, it will be difficult for India to refuse on grounds that the Tamils will be defenceless or the loss of Indian lives has been in vain.

Whereas the Army's morale will survive the consequences of egregious blunders in Sri Lanka, it is time that we begin to think of our future role in the region. India is a major power in South Asia. Although peace-loving idealists may not like to admit this, but India's geo-strategic location and developing economic strength will compel it to assume a role of growing importance in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. Historically, these roles are analogous to those of Britain, east of Suez in the Nineteenth Century, and give rise to many political, managerial and strategic issues which require careful examination if we are to avoid embarrassment, if not humiliation in the future. Already, it is evident that the prolonged operations of the IPKF in Sri Lanka, apart from the cost in terms of the nation's image, the dead and wounded, is proving to be a very expensive business, and may cause India to cancel or delay its defence modernization plans and new acquisitions, and also reduce its readiness and training levels.³

THE FUTURE

The Maldives operation was understandably launched at short notice, a few hours after the Prime Minister received a telephonic message from the President. The Prime Minister has explained how "the operation had to be undertaken in extremely difficult circumstances with zero-readiness and lack of real-time intelligence, as any delay would have led to a different situation."⁴ On the other hand, surely, the movement of the IPKF to Sri Lanka was not the outcome of a sudden crisis; events there had been smouldering

for years and began to reach a slow peak in early 1987. It is, therefore, inexcusable that the armed forces were sent on that peace keeping assignment with poor intelligence cover, exposed to unforeseen hazards, calumny and ridicule.

India is in the process of modernizing its armed forces, but has not yet been able to evolve a matching modernized decision-making apparatus at the highest levels. Evidently, the Government is aware of this short-coming. Mrs. Indira Gandhi had set up an "apex" body and then later the Inter-Disciplinary Group (IDG). Both these bodies did not survive for very long. Her son set up a Policy Advisory Group (PAG) which also only survived for a year. Thus, India today still lacks a credible body of analysts with full time role of advising the Government on the evolution of national security policies, and the supervision and control of events in a crisis. In the absence of such a body, the role is being performed by casual individuals and civil servants who are functioning as part time advisers. This results in ad hocism and a lack of responsibility that is woefully apparent.⁵

In the wake of military operations in the Falkland War (1982), the British Government set up a committee of Privy Councillors consisting of members of both parties to review the way in which the responsibilities of the Government were discharged. After our troops pull out of Sri Lanka, we too should set up a joint committee composed of all parties from both houses of Parliament, to review the events leading to the formulation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and the circumstances under which our troops were sent to perform a difficult mission on the basis of an Agreement which was confused and assessments which were so wrong. We owe that to the 700 officers and jawans who have died in Sri Lanka. The aim should not be to nominate scapegoats, but to learn lessons from the recent past and set up sound organisations to ensure that such errors are avoided in the future.

Notes & References

- 1 India Today, November 15, 1988. Sri Lanka- On The Brink. p 40
- 2 Indian Express, Pune edition, 9 November 1988. p 7
- 3 The Military Balance 1988-89, The International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- 4 Indian Express, Pune edition, 13 November 1988, p 1
- 5 Not only, as pointed out, because of events in Sri Lanka, but also in the case of the succession of other Accords: the Punjab, Mizoram, Gorkha National Liberation Front and Tripura Accords. All these are good and sincere politico-strategic accords which require deep analysis, continual supervision and control if they are to achieve desired results.