

Politico-Strategic Military Operations

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The object of war, as Clausewitz writes, is defined by politics. War, he says, is the exercise of force for the attainment of a political object and hence his famous quote “War is the continuation of politics by other means”¹ There is therefore a close link between war and politics, but what is this link? How does this link operate and how is success measured? Military operations in insurgency situations have had a long history. Although the historic experience of such operations varies across countries and over different periods, one common element has been the need for the state to assert the requirement of protecting its territorial integrity and unity. Counter insurgency operations involve the twin objectives of defeating the insurgent and assimilating the populace into the nation’s mainstream. Hence, these operations have to be closely related to the political objectives of the state. The political factor in the military strategy of such operations, therefore, assumes greater importance.

It is an accepted reality today that military operations, without regard for the collateral damage to civilian population in conflict zones, are unacceptable. However, the fact that international response to such collateral consequences has not always been as strong as required, is another issue altogether. In the present global geopolitical context, states that are democratic, liberal and responsible to their populace, need international acceptance for such military operations more than others. The principle challenge for strategists and policy makers in such situations is to relate the intensity of military operations to the scope of political resolution.

War was always fought separately from society; there was a conscious attempt to fight it away from society. But warfare today is being fought and will increasingly be fought within the society. As Sir Lawrence Freedman has mentioned in his famous paper “Transformation in Strategic Affairs”, the political context of contemporary irregular wars require that the purpose and practice of military forces be governed by liberal values. “The integration of regular wars with civil society makes the application of liberal values challenging and this challenge becomes easier to meet when military operations are understood to contribute to the development of a compelling narrative about the likely course and consequence of a conflict, in which these values are shown to be respected”.² The contemporary militaries that do not recognise this are making a big mistake.

The US strategy in Iraq allows for analysing the politico-strategic aspects of military operations and the application of liberal values to such operations. The January 2007 “surge” in US troops in Iraq and the new emphasis on counter insurgency strategy were part of US efforts to turn around a deteriorating situation. The new strategy was also meant to set the stage for scaling down US ambitions in Iraq. Defence Secretary Robert Gates had been pressing for a strategy that would rest on a foundation of broad political consensus around the idea of impeding Iraq from becoming a haven of Islamic extremism. Conventional wisdom holds that the “surge” has paid off handsomely with US casualties down significantly in 2007. When hopes for top down political efforts faded, the new strategy also adopted a bottom-up approach which would help mend frayed relationships between tribal and religious groups. However, the approach has been criticised as exacerbating the dangers of tribalism. For the long term, analysts suggest that it is important to make it clear that the USA intends to withdraw as part of a comprehensive diplomatic strategy that is designed to limit risks from the drawdown in forces.³ In Afghanistan, NATO has responded to the Taliban insurgency by bringing overwhelming force to bear which is said to underestimate the complexity of the enemy and reinforce the resentment Afghanistan’s Pashtun communities feel against foreign domination. In the recent times, NATO has recognised that while military force is important, security in the domestic sense is the critical issue facing Afghanistan. Greater stress on the civil aspects of the strategy such as focus on aid, development, governance, capacity building and building a new economic base has been called for.

Closer home, the Sri Lankan military operations in the North and East of the Country against the LTTE offer unique insights into the relationship between their political and military objectives and also a case study for future military officers, historians and strategists.

Background

Sri Lanka’s military has grown in size and skills since the 1970s and its transformation from a small peace time entity to a professional fighting force, in three decades, has been watched with admiration. The expansion in numbers and skills is a significant achievement considering the largely indigenous content of this experiment. In fighting skills, organisational efficiency and leadership, the Sri Lankan Armed Forces have demonstrated remarkable levels of military attainments.

The Sri Lankan State has made strenuous attempts to obtain a political consensus on the ethnic insurgency in the Country. It has initiated political, economic, constitutional and social measures to find ways for resolving the conflict. Its military operations have been part of the coercion – negotiation matrix that has been underway for more than two decades. These efforts have been beset, on the one hand with political dissonance in Sri Lanka and with the intransigence of the LTTE on the other. Nevertheless, the Peace Process experience – involving foreign facilitators and aid from international donor states, and its collapse are in themselves an insightful case study in peace making and conflict resolution.

Given the background of the complex challenges to state making and nation building along with the failure of the LTTE to respond to political initiatives, it is not a surprise that Sri Lanka has embarked on a largely military enterprise of seeking to destroy the LTTE elements. The primacy now accorded to the military component in the

overall strategy over the political component is a major departure from the previous policies. Sri Lanka's political and military leadership have made it clear that the military defeat of the LTTE and destruction of its leadership would take precedence, over the political choices that are required to resolve the conflict.⁴ It is believed, not without some justification, that the LTTE leadership and its military capabilities are a hindrance to the political resolution of the conflict.

Nature of Conflict and Military Response

The conflict in Sri Lanka is unique in the nature of threat that faces the State. The phrases which have been used through history do not suffice to explain the Sri Lankan situation. The definitions of insurgency, low intensity conflict, operations other than war, which have been used to define or explain conflicts elsewhere do not meet the needs of the situation.

LTTE's demonstrated level of capabilities has accentuated the situation from a low intensity conflict. It has demonstrated the ability to negotiate and stall the negotiations at will despite international criticism of its actions. It has also reached the limits of its military capacity in terms of being able to capture and hold territory, or, of being able to mount large scale operations over sustained periods. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan forces have the capacity and leadership to do so over prolonged periods of time. Hence, the balance of military capability clearly rests with the Sri Lankan military. The military advantages notwithstanding, it is clear that a military defeat of the LTTE will take time. In the interim, the full scale ground and air operations have and will continue to impact collaterally on the populace in the combat zone. The net outcome of this would be an adverse international response where the onus of responsibility to protect the citizens will weigh heavily on the State.

The examples of campaigns in the last fifty years provide useful pointers for the future. A purely military response in such unique circumstances has of necessity led to a mismatch between the military and political purposes of campaigns. The strategic challenge has remained of combining military gains with political objectives. Military victories without a tangible and parallel political direction have resulted in outcomes that made a post conflict political settlement even more difficult to obtain. There have been three primary parameters of such campaigns in the past. They apply even to the Sri Lankan scenario.

The first parameter is of the time anticipated and required for the completion of such operations. Invariably, there has been a mismatch between the two. This has had serious political consequences, often resulting from the lack of clarity of what constitutes victory. The physical attrition of the insurgent capability has not led to the end of the conflict. The choice of low cost - high value terrorist attacks will always be available to the opponent. Thus, the political dispensation, which is intended to be put into effect after the end of military operations, has not been effective. The longer the operations take the greater are the difficulties of a political outcome. Indeed the longer the operations take, greater becomes the perception of military failure to subdue the opponent. This has serious consequences for the military and political leadership.

The second primary parameter is of the economic costs of full scale military operations. Such costs have never been easy to assess. The magnitude of hidden, opportunity, spill over and sunk costs are never easy to compute. They also have an insidious effect on the national economy whose consequences are felt over a longer period of time. The longer the time frame of sustained military operations, the higher would be such economic costs.

The third parameter of such operations is in the territorial dimension. The greater the area that has to be freed of insurgent forces, the greater would be the size of the armed forces needed for keeping it secure. The socio-political costs of such military presence have historically been considered as counterproductive to the political purposes of the military operations. The political purpose of military operations in insurgency situations is not victory but peace. Therefore, the challenge for the military high command is to find ways to harmonise the military and political purposes of the operations. The political challenge of the country's leadership will always be to retain a political and ethical high ground while military operations persist.

The Future

Sri Lanka's military forces have demonstrated operational skills and determination of a high order. They are opposed by a determined insurgent group with meaningful military capability, which can be used to stretch the campaign over a long period. The insurgent forces do not seek a military victory but seek to make this a long campaign with indecisive outcomes, while raising the costs of the campaign in political and economic terms. The Sri Lankan State, therefore, has every right to choose its strategy. However, as the Indian Foreign Minister has stated, "Any country is free to choose its options, within its legal system" and the solution must take into consideration the legitimate aspirations of the affected people.

The conflict in Sri Lanka has reached a unique stage where the military option has been given primacy over political options and the outcome of the current strategy will be watched with great interest.

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