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## India's Sri Lanka War: Intelligence Perspectives

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*(This Paper was presented eleven years ago. But the points mentioned are still relevant for those Scholars and Military Officials interested in Strategic Issues- Director)*

### 1.0 Introduction

1.1 When we look at India's military intervention in Sri Lanka (1987-90) now, after two decades, we are doing with the benefit of hindsight. The two decades since then have been remarkable for a number of global developments. These include the phenomenal growth in communication and multimedia technology, introduction of liberalised world trade order, and the realignment of global power equation following the break up of the Soviet Union. As a result the concept of strategic security has expanded in scope.

1.2 In order to make a realistic assessment of the Indian Army's operations in Sri Lanka, we need to look at the strategic environment of the period. Some of the developments of special interest of that era were –

1.21 The Cold War confrontation between the Soviet Union and the U.S. was at its peak following the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, where India also had a strategic interest.

1.22 India's security focus was largely on Pakistan. As a corollary, Sri Lanka was not one of the focus areas of Military Intelligence. In fact, *Operation Brass Tacks* had just been completed in May 1987, two months before the Army had to send a task force to Sri Lanka following the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Accord (ISLA) in July 1987.

1.23 There was no integrated national security body to take informed decisions on issues affecting national security. Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) was the only forum to carry out this task. During the Sri Lanka operations a Core Group was formed to look after the day to day issues. This empowered group functioned under the Chairmanship of the Minister of State, External Affairs and in his absence the Cabinet Secretary.<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) was the only palliative to meet the requirements of Joint Services operations.

1.24 Communication technology was just making its early breakthroughs. Much of its benefits had not yet enhanced our battlefield competencies.

1.25 The advantage imparted by information technology and its applications in battle field, particularly in the field of intelligence were not available

1.3 Armed forces had fought wars in 1965 and 1971 with similar decision making structures probably with its attendant deficiencies. However, India's Sri Lanka operation qualitatively differed from all of them because it was conducted overseas. The Indian force in Sri Lanka got involved in a conflict that was neither contemplated nor planned for. More than that, for the first time the three services of Indian security forces operated jointly to carry out a counterinsurgency campaign in a foreign country.

## **2.0 Aim**

The aim of this presentation is to study issues relating to intelligence (with special focus on intelligence coordination) in the operations of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka.<sup>[2]</sup> Electronic and communications intelligence aspects are not covered in this presentation.

## **3.0 Presentation**

3.1 Part 1 – Intelligence on Sri Lanka before and during IPKF operations. .

3.2 Part 2 – Intelligence coordination at various levels.

3.3 Part 3 - Third thoughts on intelligence in overseas operations.

## **PART 1 – INTELLIGENCE BEFORE AND DURING IPKF OPERATIONS**

### **4.0 Dedicated MI resources earmarked for Sri Lanka**

4.1 Intelligence Corps is the main field and staff resource of MI. It is the only Corps of the Indian Army whose strength was reduced when the Gen Krishna Rao Committee recommendations were implemented. In 1987, before the IPKF operations started, the Intelligence Corps had a total strength not exceeding 2500 all ranks. Classified as a minor corps, traditionally employment of MI was largely confined to security and combat intelligence, with limited intelligence planning and battle field acquisition capabilities. The MI had no mandate or dedicated capability to acquire cross border intelligence till 1980 when it was given the task of acquiring limited trans-border intelligence. Intelligence acquisition units created for this purpose had a mandate to collect only military intelligence of tactical value. In the field of counter insurgency, over the years the MI had gained certain amount of expertise in interrogation and source operation for meeting the intelligence requirement of troops involved in operations. For this purpose, a divisional intelligence unit was created in each of the three divisions deployed in counter insurgency role the northeast.

4.2 During that period in the Directorate General of Military Intelligence (DGMI), Sri Lanka was grouped with the section dealing with Indian Ocean nations of peripheral interest to India like the ASEAN. On the other hand, both Bangladesh and Burma were clubbed with the section dealing with insurgency in the northeast. The terrain analysis section was totally focused on Pakistan and to a limited extent on Tibet. It was evident that Sri Lanka enjoyed a low priority in MI's areas of interest. As a result no dedicated intelligence resource was allocated to Sri Lanka for intelligence acquisition. No special effort was made to acquire intelligence of military interest on Sri Lanka from the civil intelligence agencies till 1987.

4.3 Prior to the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA), around May 1987 an intelligence team of one officer and six NCOs was moved to Chennai from the parent unit in Gorakhpur for collecting intelligence from Sri Lanka. Till the end of the IPKF operations this was the only dedicated intelligence resource available to the DGMI. (Subsequently it was built up into an intelligence unit.) Thus DGMI was entirely dependent upon the inputs from the external intelligence agency Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) which had rich resources dedicated for Sri Lanka. The Intelligence Bureau (IB), the counter intelligence arm of the government, had been keeping a close watch on the activities of thousands of Sri Lanka Tamil refugees present in Tamil Nadu. Of course, the DGMI had a regular flow of the periodic intelligence reports and summaries from the Advance HQ of the Overall Force Commander (OFC) after it was created.

4.4 Headquarters Southern Command had a team from Southern Command Liaison Unit in Chennai. Though the LU was a counter intelligence unit, the LU team provided the Command Headquarters an interface with the state and central intelligence agencies in Chennai during the IPKF operations.

4.5 After the induction of 54 Infantry Division in the first week of August 1987 in Sri Lanka, a few Tamil speaking Intelligence Corps officers and NCOs were attached to the OFC HQ at Chennai. Clearly it was a temporary arrangement as there was no specific tasking of the MI team except to collect information on the activities of both the Tamil militants and the Sri Lanka army. The intelligence personnel were dispatched to Palali on August 5, 2007 with no functional resources, other than the attached personnel.

4.6 They were not under command 54 Infantry Division. Though they were nominally under the HQ OFC, the DGMI had asked them to submit their reports directly to them till their status was formalised. The two MI officers of the team resurrected their personal contacts with Sri Lanka Tamils to send periodic reports to the DGMI. There was little intelligence input from either DGMI or from the civil intelligence agencies to 54 Infantry Division.

4.7 In September 1987, when the situation became murky in the Indian interaction with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), 57 Mtn Div Int & FS coy with about 60 personnel was moved to Palali. Its OC was upgraded to a Lt Col's appointment. Tamil speaking Intelligence Corps officers and NCOs culled from various intelligence units were posted to the unit. And there were never enough of them and the unit was always under strength.

4.8 This intelligence unit continued to be under the HQ OFC and this caused some avoidable confusion in HQ 54 Infantry Division. Its intelligence officers were scrupulously excluded from all deliberations of the Div HQ. They were asked to stay out of all interactions with the LTTE during the political parleys. Though they had collected information and built some useful local contacts that provided valuable assessments these inputs were never asked for. Nor did the Division project its requirement of specific intelligence of any kind. The intelligence team's officers were kept out of operational planning process prior to the Jaffna operations. (According to the RAW, the Army neither took the RAW into confidence nor sought its advice before Jaffna operations).

4.9 As the Jaffna operation commenced and the induction of troops took place rapidly, the OC 57 Div Int & FS Coy was asked to brief the troops prior to their operational induction. Similarly, the unit was tasked to interrogate all and sundry rounded up in the first flush of operations. This clearly indicated that troops in combat had no inkling of how to handle suspects or conduct combat interrogations. Similarly no advance planning was evident in the AG's Branch at the OFC HQ and the Div HQ for screening of civilian population or holding prisoners. This was in direct contrast to our experience during 1971 operations when we had meticulously planned in advance on handling and holding of prisoners. Thus in the early stages of war valuable opportunity to gain tactical information through interrogation was lost.

## **5.0 Intelligence resources of the Advance HQ OFC**

5.1 However, by the time two more divisions were inducted into Sri Lanka and the structure of the Advance HQ of the OFC was formalised, an intelligence unit specifically structured for the IPKF operations designated as the Ad Hoc Liaison Unit was raised. The unit had both

intelligence acquisition and interrogation capabilities. The unit commanded by a Lt Col had its headquarters in Chennai with a team each deployed in Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. It also had three rehabilitation centres (with one interrogator each) for the three divisions. In all, it had 12 officers and over 100 other ranks. An effort was made to induct as many Tamil or South Indian officers and NCOs of Intelligence Corps into the unit. One Sinhala knowing officer was also posted sometime towards end 1988. 57 Int and FS Coy provided the intelligence cover for 54 Div sector including Kilinochchi. Both the units served under the command of Col GS (Int) of the Advance HQ OFC.

5.2 Communication intelligence was provided by the EWCP. It worked closely with the troops and provided accurate real time information.

5.3 Though the RAW had complained that they were not consulted prior to the launching of Jaffna operations, after the formation of the Advance HQ OFC, the Chennai RAW unit maintained close touch and provided valuable inputs particularly on political developments in Sri Lanka. However its contribution on militant disposition and assessment of LTTE capabilities was neither timely nor exhaustive.

5.4 Despite enjoying excellent personal relations at the senior level with MI officers, the Q Branch of the Tamil Nadu State Police and the Joint Directorate of the IB, Chennai provided no information throughout the entire IPKF operation. They had enormous information on the LTTE and its tentacles in Tamil Nadu which could have helped us in our operations against the LTTE. However such information was never provided. In the case of the Q Branch this was mainly due to the absence of formal orders from the state government which had taken a politically hostile stand against the IPKF operations. The IB usually fobbed off our requests saying that they had only political information, though in counter insurgency political information also had a great relevance on military operations.

## **6.0 MI performance: positives and negatives**

6.1 The MI personnel despite the initial glitches of command and control and resource limitations made some positive contributions. A few of these were as under:

6.11 As early as September 1987, the MI detachment in its assessment to the DGMI had said that if the IPKF went to war it would take three years to reduce it to manageable proportions. This assessment almost came true.

6.12 Despite the lack of clarity in the early stages the DGMI managed to rise to the occasion to extend maximum possible support in identifying intelligence resources and moving them within a couple of months. It also made efforts to recruit Sinhala knowing Tamils who had migrated from Sri Lanka.

6.12 Even during the period of troubled peace from August to October 1987, the MI officers had made some useful contacts both within the LTTE and among influential pro-LTTE civilians particularly in Jaffna and Trincomalee. These contacts came in handy when the operations started. They provided valuable inputs on political moves of the LTTE as well as on some key issues like LTTE's

contact with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which was carrying out its own insurgency in Sinhala areas, procurement of MANPADS by the LTTE, contacts between the Sri Lanka President Premadasa and the LTTE leadership etc.

6.13 Well before the operation, we videographed the LTTE inspired civilian agitations in Jaffna and Trincomalee and identified key ring leaders. When the operation started, some of them were picked up and successfully turned into informers who gave useful tactical information on movement of LTTE pistol groups and ambushes.

6.14 In two cases we managed to get clinching evidence in the form of photographs and wiretaps of collusion between Sri Lankan army elements and the LTTE. These helped us to understand the extent of collusion between the Sri Lanka government and the LTTE.

6.15 Useful contacts were built in Sri Lanka's National Intelligence Bureau. Though some of their information was misleading, it helped to insulate us against some of the counter intelligence threats MI was facing.

6.2 There were also some weaknesses in the MI functioning; these were as follows:

6.21 Lack of MI resources allocated prior to the operation by the DGMI had resulted in absence of intelligence assets in Sri Lanka. This had an adverse impact on the initial inability of the MI to provide timely and useful information to 54 Inf Div for the Jaffna operations.

6.22 Despite receiving inputs from both RAW and IB and other agencies on a regular basis, the DGMI did not provide assessments that could have helped the IPKF operations. Similarly the HQ Southern Command also failed to provide useful assessments or inputs.

6.23 There was little MI input on LTTE activity in Tamil Nadu. This was mainly due to the completely negative attitude of Tamil Nadu Government resulting in total denial of access to information on the LTTE available with the state intelligence. Action taken to rectify this by the DGMI and the Army HQ, if any, had little impact on their attitude.

6.24 The LTTE was acting with impunity in Tamil Nadu during the entire period of operations, exposing the troops to potential LTTE threat. This created a great feeling of insecurity among our Tamil sources, who felt that we were not seriously involved in tackling the LTTE. They were reluctant to work for us as they felt we did not have enough "influence" in this ambience. This affected MI's performance.

6.25 Most of the MI officers had little background knowledge on Sri Lanka or its environment when they were inducted. There is perhaps a requirement for building regional specialists in the course of MI officers' careers so that they could improve their expertise.

6.26 Intelligence NCOs performance was far below par. They had no capability to carry out elementary interrogations. Nor were they clear about their duties in a counter insurgency environment. Both officers and NCOs tended to accept un- assessed information from sources without vetting the credibility.

6.27 Intelligence staffing was poor in formation headquarters. At one stage, in three of the four divisions the GSO1 (Int) were low medical category officers; a few of them had no intelligence exposure. As intelligence had limited dedicated staff resources, their posting in divisions was far from prudent.

6.28 Quality of frontline soldiers' knowledge of handling prisoners, segregating them for detailed interrogation etc was poor. The Command HQ was in the best position to address such lacunae to provide short term training to officers and NCOs from all arms on a rotational basis. This was probably not even contemplated, though it had been done in the past in 1971.

6.29 There was practically no input from Air or Naval Intelligence sources. This was surprising because in Colombo more than one merchant ship officer reported seeing fishing boats flashing 'LTTE' in semaphore signals in Gulf of Mannar indicating regular movement of boats supplying the LTTE from Tamil Nadu.

6.291 The Tamil media in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka was rich open source information which went untapped due to shortage of manpower. Similarly, there was not enough inter face with Indian media men who had travelled into LTTE areas either covertly or openly. This rich source also went unexploited.

6.292 At the end of the IPKF operations, there was no formal MI arrangement for taking over the network of intelligence sources built over the period of IPKF operations in Sri Lanka. Similarly the rich data base on the LTTE militants went unused.

6.293 Few formation commanders only had used MI resources as part of their overall intelligence planning. Generally they expected MI to produce tactical information reactively. Thus often there was lack of convergence between their expectations and results.

## **PART-2 INTELLIGENCE COORDINATION AT VARIOUS LEVELS**

7.0 Lack of intelligence coordination and cooperation among various intelligence agencies is a hardy perennial in the investigative studies of all most all operations in India. The most reason report of this genre is the K Subrahmanyam Committee report on Kargil operations. And probably in spite of findings of such committees, this problem is likely to persist because intelligence agencies apply the principle of Need to Know (from their point of view) to often withhold information. This is inherent i in the nature of intelligence operations which carry enormous risks for the individuals who originate such information.

8.0 Unfortunately, in the Sri Lanka operational scene despite our best efforts intelligence coordination with civil agencies produced very little useful intelligence. The Core Group was supposed to be a body to handle such issues. Some of those who had attended its meetings said the Core Group probably spent more time discussing the situation in Afghanistan than resolving difficult problems that had cropped up during IPKF operations. The problems faced by the IPKF due to political developments in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka that required Core Group directions were left unresolved. This left the IPKF with the fall out of such aberrations. Many such decisions though outside the scope of intelligence coordination, had their impact on the MI operations. MI's intelligence acquisition effort was handicapped as a direct consequence of absence of meaningful coordination in both letter and spirit at the top level.

## **9.0 Coordination with civil intelligence agencies**

9.1 Coordination between the MI as the user and the RAW as the provider had always been one sided. The DGMI had always found that focused military intelligence requirements were usually not met because RAW had its own priorities. However, after initial hiccups on this count in Sri Lanka, the RAW attempted to rectify the situation after the Advance HQ OFC was created. However, RAW could not provide specific information on the LTTE's military capabilities or cogent assessments on LTTE strengths. This was surprising, considering the enormous depth of its knowledge about the LTTE.

9.2 Ideally, when the IPKF was inducted the RAW had the capability to produce a comprehensive handbook on Sri Lanka containing all the information the forces require. The fact that neither the Army projected such a requirement to the RAW, nor the RAW anticipated it speaks for itself. This is due to the enormous cultural gap that exists between the two organisations. I am not confident such aberration would not exist in the next overseas operation. After all how many country studies of the type produced by the CIA have been made available to the security forces from any Indian intelligence agency? With the MI acting as a bridge, this gap could easily be closed if the two premier agencies make up their mind to do so.

9.3 In the counter insurgency scene, top level agency coordination alone will not suffice. It has to come down to formation level. At present interaction between the Army and RAW counterparts is based only on personal equation established between the two in the absence of standard operating procedures for information sharing. Thus officers on both sides grow up in a culture of denial rather than sharing. Perhaps we can take a leaf out of the Japanese industrial management practice of forming Small Group Activity for the user and producer for better understanding of the user problems to evolve a solution.

9.3 As far as the IB is concerned, internal political intelligence has been occupying an increasing horizon in their activities. This is happening at a time when internal threats to national security are growing enormously. Functionally in such critical internal situations the IB representatives had been forthcoming in sharing information of military interest. However, in the case of counter insurgency operations overseas the fine line dividing political and operational intelligence gets blurred. Perhaps the failure of the IB to understand this explains its



reluctance to share information with the IPKF. In an overseas theatre our forces need political information as much as military related information as they are operating in an external environment. This needs be brought home to improve IB's information sharing record in future overseas operations.

9.4 The failure of the State police machinery to share intelligence relevant to the IPKF represents the dissonance in our national security perceptions. The failure of the Tamil Nadu Home Department to act in the interest of national security for political reasons had kept up the morale of Tamil militant combating our forces in Sri Lanka. This has been well documented in the Jain Commission report. It is disturbing to see the continued downgrading of national security needs to meet the demands of political priorities. The precedent set by Tamil Nadu Government during the IPKF operations on this count appears to have taken roots now in the political culture. A similar contingency could arise in our future overseas operations also. In order to face such a situation, it would be prudent for the armed forces to get clear mandates on such issues in advance while going on overseas operations of the future. In any case as armed forces are not the sole guardians of national security; we need to draw the attention of other stakeholders to this aspect.

## **10.0 Internal intelligence coordination**

10.1 The experience in intelligence sharing between the three services intelligence wings was minimal. In the Sri Lanka operational situation, the lack interest shown by the air force and naval intelligence counterparts was probably because the MI had not articulated its needs where they could have usefully contributed. Perhaps it was also due to the lack of smoothness in the overall command and control equation involving the three services. As far as intelligence is concerned the creation of the Defence Intelligence Agency is only a first step to resolve this impasse; it has a long way to go to overcome the existing grittiness in this process.

10.2 During the entire period of IPKF operations other than ELINT and SIGINT inputs, there was little else from top down the army chain. Political decisions taken at home impacted intelligence operations of both MI and RAW with tectonic effects in Sri Lanka. The DGMI could have helped MI planning process in the IPKF with appropriate and timely inputs.

10.3 Generally there was high expectation of tactical intelligence from MI among frontline troops. Unfortunately collecting such information in less populated and jungle terrain in areas like Mullaitivu district is not possible. So there has to be a blend of tactical intelligence devices with HUMINT inputs for the use of troops in combat. This was absent in Sri Lanka. However, this also requires a degree of intelligence awareness among the front line infantry units. Only Para Commando units showed such awareness and this gave certain amount of 'muscle' to MI operations conducted with their help. Perhaps their well rounded training has enabled them to understand the intelligence requirements peculiar to counter insurgency operations. There is a need to inculcate this awareness among other infantry units for better intelligence coordination with frontline troops.

10.4 Communication and electronic intelligence produced valuable inputs. However, such information was not validated adequately due to

paucity of intelligence staff. In future operations of force projection such inputs are likely to increase enormously. In order to assess the overall picture perhaps we will have to train intelligence staff at the formation level to combine HUMINT, ELINT and SIGINT inputs to evolve realistic assessments.

## **PART 3 - THIRD THOUGHTS ON INTELLIGENCE IN**

### **OVERSEAS OPERATIONS**

#### **11.0 Perspective planning and intelligence**

I am not very clear whether intelligence needs form part of perspective planning. If not it has to be rectified. This will help MI make its own long term plans to build expertise as per projected operational requirements. That should also include inputs required from civil intelligence agencies. This would require close cooperation and coordination with civil intelligence agencies. Unless we plan and act on evolving such an information matrix, as success in overseas operations are dependent upon the performance of the external intelligence agency. Such a plan if executed would fill in gaps in strategic intelligence picture over a period of time. This would have its happy fall out on MI's own intelligence acquisition plans that would also include ELINT inputs which would become the real time intelligence purveyor of the future. It would also help identification of other secondary requirements like specialised language requirements and country specialisation.

#### **12.0 Intelligence staffing**

Military intelligence is a specialised job that requires the application of military knowledge to understand the information needs of the battle field and provide useful assessments to the fighting forces. Skill sets required for MI staff in future operations of force projection have widened in scope requiring real time assessment capability. No doubt the quantum jump in communication and information technology provides useful tools for the MI to meet this requirement. However, much of its success would depend upon the training imparted to intelligence staff to be technologically savvy in keeping with the dynamics of the emerging battle field needs.

#### **13.0 HUMINT planning**

Sri Lanka experience has shown MI's HUMINT success is directly proportional to the investment made prior to the operation. It takes about 18 months to two years to develop useful HUMINT sources in a green field, overseas territory. Fortunately, in Sri Lanka among Tamils and Sinhals we had sympathetic sections that were prepared to help us out. The local government and armed forces were also generally friendly. Future overseas operations might not enjoy such advantages. Intelligence planners will have to assess and understand the environmental dynamics in an overseas setting in advance to meaningfully develop HUMINT resources organically and coordinate with other intelligence providers to fulfil the expectations of our forces in overseas operations of the future.

#### 14. **Getting ready for technology driven overseas theatres of war**

With the nation poised to emerge as a regional power in the near future, MI has to transform itself into a technology driven organisation to meld TECHINT, ELINT, SIGINT and HUMINT inputs on a real time basis to meet the requirements of force projection overseas. Focus on intelligence management rather than mere information management is likely to be the order of the day in the near future. That would by and large remove the aberrations of intelligence acquisition and coordination and contribute meaningfully to assist operational planning and execution.

*This paper was presented at a seminar "Indian Experience in Force Projection" organised by the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS) at New Delhi on September 15 and 16,*

[1] Apart from the MOS, MEA/Cabinet Secretary, the members of the Core Group included the three vice chiefs of staff, Joint Secretary MEA, Joint Secretary PMO, DGMO, DGMI, Director IB, Director (Secretary) RAW and Principal Information Officer.

[2] The designation of the force as Indian Peace Keeping Force was formalized only a few years after Indian troops were withdrawn from Sri Lanka in 1990. In this paper the term IPKF denotes the employment of Indian troops during the period from August 1987 to March 1990

#### **Tags:**

Sri Lanka <sup>[1]</sup>

LTTE. IPKF <sup>[2]</sup>

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