

Effective though it was, the Sri Lankan government's strategy was a double-edged sword. "Denying observer access to the battlefield drew charges from the west of having something to hide." In this conclusion, General Mehta is absolutely right. Starved by the government of news, the media was fed by the diaspora, in whose hands, it proved a potent weapon. During the final phase, this mounting media outrage gave rise to accusations of wholesale slaughter and genocide. It was this perception which led to desperate, last minute attempts, by the USA and then the foreign ministers of Britain and France, to save the LTTE. Thus, in a way, the LTTE were right- media pressure did precipitate international outrage and it did lead to an attempt at intervention. Their great mistake, however, was to imagine that it would be successful. The question which General Mehta should have asked is what else could the Sri Lankan government have done? What else would any government have done? From a military point of view, the danger of having outside observers on a battlefield is acknowledged by soldiers right across the world. In Iraq and Afghanistan, some of the most distinguished western reporters have been allowed to work as embedded journalists with the forces of their own country. Complete outsiders, however, have not.

Given the attitude of the western media and the history of leaks which had previously characterised the Eelam War, was this a risk which Sri Lanka could afford to take? The alternative is all too clear. If the media had not been kept out, the army would have found its every move under scrutiny. Its every step would have been dogged by protest and condemnation and ultimately, the offensive would have ground to a halt.

Perhaps this issue could have been avoided by having observers from neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and allies like China and Russia. Ultimately, this was a risk which the Sri Lankan government chose not to take.

In the final analysis, there can be little argument with General Mehta's assertion that Prabhakaran made a fundamental mistake in fighting a conventional war. However, let us try to see it from Prabhakaran's point of view. General Mehta evokes these shrinking horizons very well.

The loss of Kilinochchi transformed the horizontal boundary into a vertical one, running along the A-9 from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya. The Tigers were squeezed into a shrinking perimeter north of Mullaitivu, reduced from a territory of 15,000 sq. kilometers to land the size of a football field.

The LTTE, he tells us, "had no Plan B and concentrated all its fighters in a diminishing box off the Mullaitivu coast."<sup>118</sup> It is difficult to continue fighting a guerilla war when you no longer have the freedom of manoeuvre and are confronted on all sides. Trapped within a diminishing area, what can you do when you no longer have the physical and mental space to operate? What else is there to do but stand and fight?

## Conclusion

Major General Mehta's final analysis is incisive and sobering. This reviewer cannot but agree with his opinion that although Sri Lanka has set a new paradigm on the use of force, it has only done so at a huge diplomatic price. It is a price which it is now paying. How high the final price will be, remains to be seen.

It is Mehta's opinion that, "the winning formula could not have been cobbled together without Delhi's active and passive assistance." Although there is no doubting the role played by India, the majority of Sri Lankans would view this rather differently. From their perspective, perhaps it would be more correct to say that "the winning formula could not have been cobbled together without China and Pakistan's active and passive assistance." As Mehta himself admits, when India refused to supply Sri Lanka with the arms and armament which it needed, it was Pakistan and China who stepped in to fill the breach.

As most Sri Lankans and many foreign observers would agree, it was China's support which made the difference. Many analysts feel that China's involvement and support was crucial in influencing India's decision to support the Rajapakse administration. Given its previous support for the Tamil Tigers and the importance of Tamil Nadu in Indian politics, there are many who doubt that India's support would have been so wholehearted, if Rajapakse had not obtained Chinese support.

In this context, Mehta cites Presidential Advisor Razik Zarook, "If India tries to stop Sri Lanka, Colombo will get even closer to China." It is difficult to believe that this was not a consideration behind India's decision. It was, to all intents and purposes, the recognition of a fait accompli. Once China had decided to support Sri Lanka, given its own interests in the Indian Ocean region, India had no option but to go along. Mehta himself admits as much. "With the elimination of the LTTE, India's strategic marginalisation is an impending reality."

While admitting that "there are lessons to learn from Sri Lanka's military success," General Mehta is keen to emphasise that India is different. India, he says, cannot follow the Sri Lankan example, as it believes in bringing insurgents to the negotiating table to join the political process. In this context, he could have and perhaps should have pointed out, that nearly seven attempts had been made by successive governments to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table. The question which arises is what does one do when the terrorists refuse to come to the negotiating table? As Mehta himself agrees, the political process was something which the LTTE turned their backs on. What does one do in those circumstances? What does any nation do?

Operation Blue Star, the assault on the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1984, is one example which comes to mind. Although it was determined not to damage the holy shrine, the Indian government found that it could not resolve the situation without breaching it. Major General Brar had hoped to force Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his militants into surrendering. However, this did not happen and the first few waves of commandos were repulsed with heavy losses. Tanks were then called up and the militants were pounded into surrender, and in the process, one of India's holiest shrines was severely damaged.

The future poses interesting questions for Sri Lanka's great neighbour. What she will do, one wonders, when she is faced with a similar challenge from within, while at the same time, it is encouraged from without? This is the nature of the challenge which Sri Lanka has had to master. Far from not having anything to learn, these are problems which India too will have to confront, if and when she faces a major crisis, either on her north-western border with Pakistan and or her north-eastern borders with China. Should either the Kashmiri issue or the tribal demands in Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura, reach uncontrollable proportions, these will very soon be very real concerns.

General Mehta's paper is a well argued defence of India's foreign policy objectives, based on her national interests. In this context, he echoes the calls for a political solution which have been made by India, the United Nations and the western powers. Right from the very beginning, he voices the opinion that "the root of the problem has not been addressed," an impression which he reiterates at the very end, "the cause that led to the insurgency has been brushed aside." The word 'solution' signifies the permanent resolution of a question. For a political solution to work, it has to be acceptable to all sections of the community. In a democracy, that includes both the majority and the minority. Only then can it endure, and only then can it become a solution.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has been consistent in his insistence that a permanent resolution to Sri Lanka ethnic tensions can only come from within. This, perhaps, is the only way forward. The last political solution - the Indo-Lanka Accord - was imposed on Sri Lanka from outside. It did not result in peace- only in more fighting. It is now widely acknowledged that the conflict may well have been resolved in 1987, if India had allowed the Sri Lankan army to clear the peninsula. As it was, Indian intervention only succeeded in prolonging the conflict and fuelling the JVP rebellion against the government. The JVP insurrection lasted from 1987-9 and resulted in a bloody civil war amongst the Sinhalese, which cost more than 60,000 lives.

The whole episode only serves to underline a basic reality. The solution that everybody else desires may not be desirable for Sri Lanka; it may not even be workable, and ultimately, it is Sri Lanka which will have to pay the price. This is something which India and the outside world have yet to understand. Only then, can there be a permanent resolution.

In this context, it is important to point out that the Sri Lanka of today is no longer the country that it was before the last Eelam War. As Sri Lanka has changed, so have her politics and so, has her idea of her place in the world. Despite the immense pressure which has been applied by the United Nations, the western powers and India, Sri Lanka continues to go her own way. After having defied all the odds and come through the very worst, it is unlikely that this administration will give way on anything less. To force it to do so would only exaggerate, increase tensions and shore up trouble for the future.

The Sri Lanka of today is much bolder and far more confident, far less likely to be dictated to and far more attuned to her own rhythms and priorities. It is a story which all those dealing with Sri Lanka should try to understand, for it is the reality which they will encounter.

Concluded

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