

DIPLOMACY

High Stakes Gamble

India's role in Sri Lanka has strategic advantages

"I told my commanders that it was a very difficult mission, a very sad mission and also that we would do our utmost to be fair, humane and use minimum force even at the risk of accepting more casualties than we normally would. They were told that they were going in against their own people."

General K. Sundarji, INDIA TODAY, February 1986.

THE first time Krishnaswami Sundarji issued those orders, it was as head of the Indian Army's Western Command. The mission: Operation Bluestar, the June 1984 army action to flush out terrorists from Amritsar's Golden Temple. On October 10, 1987, he found himself repeating exactly the same orders to his commanders, this time as chief of army staff. The mission: Operation Pawan, the Indian Army action to disarm the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

Both operations bear traumatic similarities—a battle with unfamiliar constraints; the emotional involvement of the civilian population; a congested, urban battleground; a highly-motivated and heavily-armed foe of the same ethnic identity. But there the similarity abruptly ends. Bluestar was a domestic operation; Pawan has, for the first time, placed Indian troops on foreign soil to tackle the domestic problem of another country, and at considerable cost.

But in the eyes of South Block, Operation Pawan will be worth every paisa—and the life of every Indian soldier lost in Sri Lanka. The immediate objective may be to ensure the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord but there is also a broader diplomatic advantage inherent in the presence of the Indian Army on the island that is designed to finally—and

firmly—establish India's pre-eminence as the regional superpower.

That may be a bit premature—the accord has a long way to go before full implementation—but the current air of elation and confidence in South Block has not been in evidence since the aftermath of the 1971 operations in what is now Bangladesh. The Indian Peace Keeping

(wind) is aptly named. The change in South Block, which houses the offices of the prime minister, the External Affairs Ministry and the Defence Ministry, is remarkable—and palpable. At no other time has the Indian military and political leadership marched so closely in step and to the same drummer. What diplomats refer to as "a projection of India's power", army generals translate as "the higher direction of war". The loss of lives in Sri Lanka, the financial cost and the fact that the enemy is of Tamil origin is seen as small sacrifice compared to the gains for India's long-term strategic interests. According to army sources, the loss of 266 Indian Army lives (the official toll till last

week) is the minimum price they expect to pay for establishing New Delhi's "sphere of influence".

Already, as Indian strategists point out, the effects are in evidence. In one stroke of Rajiv's Parker pen, New Delhi has ensured that the only foreign military presence in Sri Lanka will be Indian. Statements by Sri Lankan ministers like Gamini Dissanayake that the accord does not bar Colombo from having Israeli "experts", are seen as catering to a local constituency and not any climb-down on the accord.

More important, in South Block's view, is that Pakistan's military relationship with Sri Lanka has been permanently severed. Prior to the accord, Sri Lankan security forces were being trained by the Pakistan Army in Sri Lanka as well as in Pakistan. The Indian Army brass has also never forgotten that in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, Islamabad was allowed to use Colombo as a refuelling base for its aircraft. "That situation will never be allowed to happen again," says a senior army officer. "Pakistan's military involvement in Sri Lanka came to an end on July 29, 1987, and we intend to make certain it stays that way." Officials also point to the fact that the strategic harbour of Trincomalee is now effectively in Indian control and no longer capable of becoming another Diego Garcia. "If the Americans had been given Trinco as an R & R

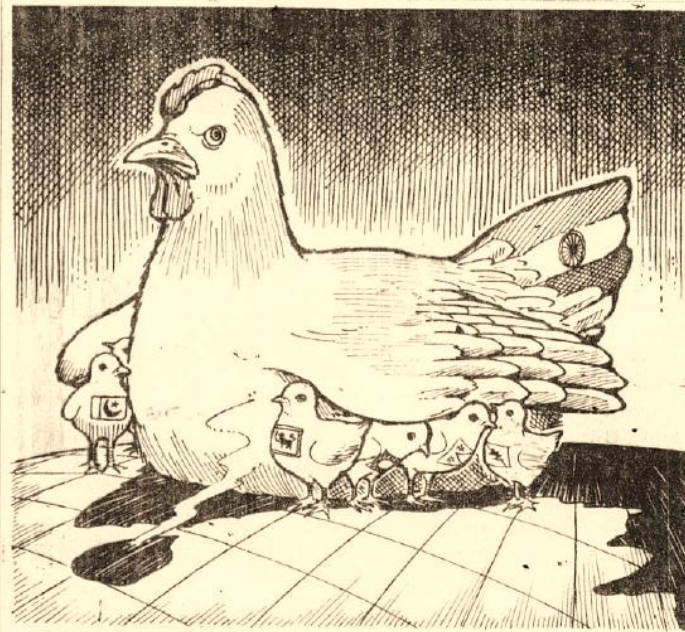


Illustration by AJIT NINAN

There is broader-diplomatic advantage inherent in the presence of the Indian Army on the island that is designed to finally establish India's pre-eminence as the regional superpower.

Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka is seen as the cutting edge of the boldest Indian diplomatic initiative undertaken in recent years. Senior diplomats and army strategists refer to it as a "turning point" in its regional and international ambitions.

In army headquarters, be-medalled generals bandy phrases like: "We're living in exciting times." Others claim: "We are in the process of changing the region's history. It is tragic that we are fighting Tamils but we must use it to advantage."

In that sense, Operation Pawan

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(rest and recreation) base, we would have had no choice but to treble our naval force," says an Indian admiral.

South Block also points to the potential problem of having 1,20,000 refugees from Sri Lanka sitting on Indian soil indefinitely, a figure that confidential military projections say could easily have doubled had India not intervened. "What we are talking about is the prospect of another Bangladesh in Tamil Nadu. We just could not afford that to happen," says a foreign ministry source.

THESSE are, of course, the obvious, immediate benefits for India. But in the high-security corner of South Block that houses the army top brass' offices, the growing pile of secret position papers, prime ministerial briefs, tactical reports and long-term strategy papers all indicate the broader diplomatic profits from India's Sri Lankan thrust—and a newly-aggressive policy which recognises the growing role of the army as a key element in that policy. Says a serving general: "The Indian Army is not the same as it was in 1962. It now fits into India's power projection."

One such secret report points out that the primary military advantage is that "you are fighting your battles outside your country" (unlike Bluestar), and this has a limited (Tamil Nadu only) domestic fall-out. Army officials insist that Operation Pawan was part of carefully-crafted, long-term strategic planning which included the possibility of high casualties in the initial stages of the operation. "Admittedly, we expected the LTTE to be less intransigent and more in our control. In that sense we miscalculated. But the prospect of the Indian Army having to take on the LTTE militarily was an option in our projections," says a general. Adds Minister of State for External Affairs K. Natwar Singh: "No government can go into an agreement of this nature without having tied up the obvious loose ends. We examined every possible option. There were no low-cost options available. If anybody can suggest a better alternative, we will gladly examine it."

In fact, the secret army papers compare Operation Pawan with the British involvement in the Falklands and forcefully insist that Sri Lanka can "under no circumstances" become another Vietnam or Afghanistan. In military terms, the Indian Army now believes that the LTTE is no longer a major threat and it is only a matter of time before the organisation, or at least a major part of it, surrenders. South Block also claims that in the

event of an unconditional surrender by the LTTE, they will still be ensured accommodation in the subsequent political set-up for the north and east.

Army projections do not, however, discount the prospect of the IPKF being in Sri Lanka indefinitely. In a secret briefing paper sent to Rajiv Gandhi, Sundarji has termed a pull-out by the IPKF as "unacceptable". Says one of his key aides: "We would like to change our nomenclature from IPKF to the Accord Implementation Force. That is our main brief—to ensure that the accord is fully implemented. Pulling out before that will be political and military suicide." In the briefing papers on Operation Pawan, the army has detailed its short-term and long-term intentions which, as one states, "isto

Army intelligence puts the current strength of the LTTE in Sri Lanka at 4,000 men, armed mainly with SLRs (Self-Loading Rifles), AK-47s, G-3 rifles and carbines, heavy machine-guns and rocket launchers. They no longer have the ability to manufacture mines, mortar and grenades as they were doing earlier except in very small numbers. The strength is currently 29,633 men. Pal is the headquarters of the 54th Infantry Division which is responsible for Jaffna city, under the control of the 41st Infantry Brigade while the 91st Infantry Division has been entrusted with protecting lives of the civilian population. The 1st Infantry Division has been deployed at Navakulli and the 115th Infantry Brigade at Point Pedro. Under the 36th Infantry

The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka is the cutting edge of the boldest Indian diplomatic initiative undertaken in recent years. Senior diplomats and army strategists refer to it as the "turning point".



leave one unified Sri Lanka in which the Tamils are given their rightful status and Sri Lanka is not an adversary."

The short-term plan is, as the paper says, "to bend the LTTE without breaking it". The LTTE still has plenty of arms though they appear to be running short of ammunition. Intelligence sources revealed to INDIA TODAY that they are well funded by expatriate Tamils—the LTTE has recently bought a ship called the *Miyana* in Europe with the intention of loading it with arms and ammunition, sailing it to a port like Singapore and then transferring the cargo to smaller boats to try and slip through the naval blockade of the Palk Straits.

Division, headquartered at Trincomalee is the 47th Infantry Brigade at Killinochchi, 72nd Infantry Brigade at Vavuniya, 340th (Independent) Infantry Brigade at Trincomalee and Muthur and 76th Infantry Brigade at Batticaloa. The IPKF also has one armoured regiment from 63rd Cavalry with T-72 tanks and support from Akbar, the Indian name for Mi-24 helicopter gunships.

The troops involved have been deliberately chosen to represent as wide a cross-section of the Indian Army as possible and includes: the Brigade of Guards Parachute Regiment; Para Commando Punjab Regiment; Grenadiers; Madras Regiment; Maratha Light Infantry; Ra-

putana Rifles; Rajput Regiment; Sikh Regiment; Sikh Light Infantry; Garhwal Rifles; Mahar Regiment and Gorkha Rifles.

ACCORDING to army intelligence assessments of the situation in Sri Lanka, the ally in the LTTE appointment is not so much Pirabhakaran as his number two, Mahattaya, the man who surfaced last fortnight to orchestrate the handing over of the 18 Indian Army prisoners held by the LTTE. "Mahattaya is now more of a hawk than Pirabhakaran who is perhaps still susceptible to influence from someone like (Tamil Nadu Chief Minister) M.G. Ramachandran. Mahattaya, and perhaps the more blood-thirsty of his followers, will still carry on the battle," says an army source, adding,

top sources, actually welcomed it. "Washington may value its strategic alliance with Islamabad but it is also in their interests to have stability in the region. Only India can ensure that," says the official.

That confidence is bolstered by the unspoken acceptance that the other superpower, the Soviet Union, will back New Delhi to the hilt. Soviet Premier N.T. Ryzhkov in fact, took a public stance last fortnight in "fully supporting" India's role in Sri Lanka. Obviously, it admirably suits Moscow to have India assert herself as the cock of the regional walk. The Indo-Sri Lankan agreement has also been supported at the recent Commonwealth summit, and by the European Economic Community (EEC).

leadership and a package border agreement could be on the anvil sooner than most people expect.

India has also let it be known to Nepal that it will no longer tolerate Kathmandu playing sides and has warned Nepal of the consequences of its recent intention to buy anti-aircraft guns from China. Bangladesh leader Ershad's capitulation on the Chakma refugee issue is another indicator. The Indian director-general of military operations recently informed his Pakistani counterpart that the presence of 30,000 Indian troops in Sri Lanka should not tempt Islamabad into any aggressive moves as India was quite capable of handling any military threat from across the border. Says a senior diplomat: "We want to maintain good relations with all our neighbours and respect their unity and territorial integrity. But our size and the legacy of geography has given us a responsibility and a role that we cannot shirk."

In Sri Lanka itself, the Indian Government has launched a new diplomatic offensive to win over, or at least convince of India's good intentions, the most aggressive critics of the accord. High Commissioner J.N. Dixit has, in the past fortnight, met with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Premadasa, the most rabid India-baiter in the Sri Lankan Cabinet. The meeting between the two—the first in almost 18 months—is seen in New Delhi as a major breakthrough. Dixit also met with anti-accord opposition leader and former prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike with much more visible success. Bandaranaike's statements after the meeting show a greater appreciation for India's role in the island than at any previous time.

In the eastern part of the island, the IPKF, under a plan called Operation Cachet, is quickly consolidating its hold in the knowledge that the LTTE's writ does not run here as in the north. IPKF sources also say that they have a plan to prevent colonisation by the Sinhalese in the eastern province—one of the main fears of the Tamils. "We are looking at the long-term implications of our involvement. Whichever way the dice falls, we have a contingency plan for it. Every move by the IPKF is approved in New Delhi. Only if there is a 50 per cent chance of success is the green signal given," says one of the officials in charge of monitoring the Sri Lankan situation.

That is perhaps the most credible sign of South Block's intentions to see the accord through to the end—and ensure that India does not suffer in the process. In

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IPKF in Jaffna: consolidating its hold

"that means we may be there for some time in a situation comparable to Punjab today. We think India and the Indian Army is big enough to handle two Punjabs. That is the basis of our motivation."

And of South Block's indirect game plan—to spread the message of the Rajiv Doctrine to the region. South Block points out that the military offensive has been matched by a diplomatic one. Rajiv's visit to the White House, they assert, was essentially to explain India's role in Sri Lanka, and its broader regional contours. The US Administration reportedly accepted that viewpoint and, according to

That New Delhi has begun to assert her regional authority diplomatically is increasingly in evidence. During the recent border talks between India and China, New Delhi made it abundantly clear that Beijing's claims to Arunachal Pradesh would have to be discarded before any progress was possible. Indian officials say that the army now has the Chinese Army pinned down in Wandung on the border and will continue to apply military pressure to convince Beijing that New Delhi cannot be trifled with. That message may have gone home. The Chinese side was more accommodating than at any of the earlier border talks. Rajiv has been invited to Beijing by the Chinese

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South Block, a core group of senior officers from the External Affairs Ministry and the army has been set up to monitor the situation virtually minute-by-minute. "This is a serious issue and we cannot afford to be casual about it. There is pressure on us, there is tremendous pressure on the Sri Lankan Government. But we have the expertise to handle it so that our interests, those of the Sri Lankan Government and of the Tamils in Sri Lanka are met. That is the bottom line," insists Natwar Singh.

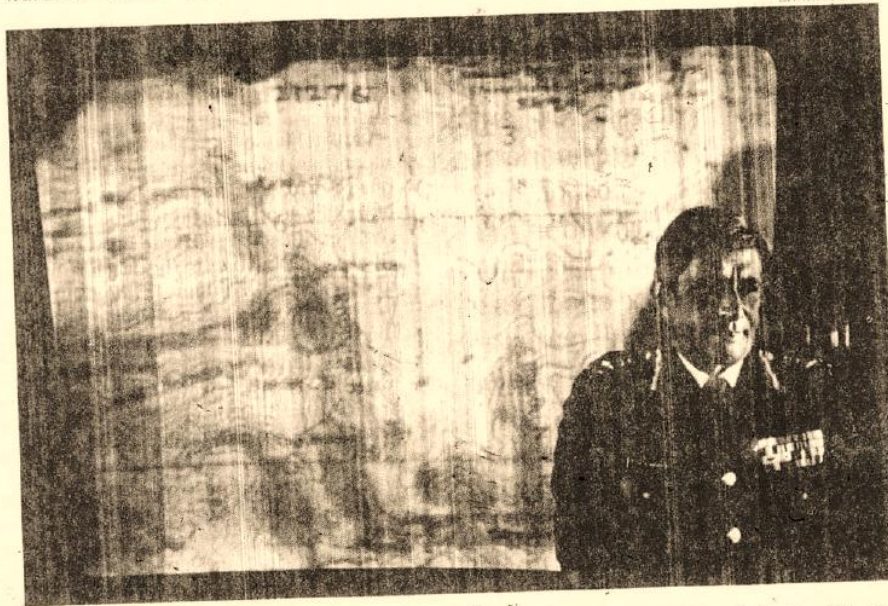
Clearly, New Delhi has its sights set on a major diplomatic triumph and is pulling out all the stops to ensure that it is successful. But much will depend on the Sri Lankan Government and Jayewardene himself—and the unwritten

Delhi's new aggressiveness is also obviously correlated to the timing and the new rapport that Sundarji has established with the political high command. Not since the days of Sam Manekshaw have the armed forces wielded the kind of clout they now do in South Block. The main reason for that is Sundarji himself.

Sundarji wears his flamboyance as a badge of honour, and his powers of persuasion and oratory are legend. The office of the chief of army staff would be unrecognisable to its previous occupants. It bristles with high-tech gadgetry including laser projectors and disks that superimpose images on maps and charts to help plan military strategy and offer alternatives in different operational situations. On major exercises like Brass-

ick, General Patton-like character, critics paint him to be. Before taking as chief, Sundarji locked himself away in Goa to compile his personal strategy bible for the Indian Army. His brief to the prime minister and the Cabinet are military masterpieces, brilliantly written. But there is also no denying that he could be prone to over-confidence when looking at the regional woods. Delhi may have missed the trees.

New Delhi's desire to flex muscle is very well, but to accomplish that effectively also requires widespread public support. India's efforts in Sri Lanka hardly be said to have that—only because New Delhi's explanations have not been convincing enough. And reason for that is a crucial one—cred-



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agreements that have been hammered out since the accord was signed last July. The LTTE may be on the run and in disarray, but it will take a lot of convincing before the majority Sinhalese cease viewing the Indian Army as an occupation force. For Indian diplomacy, Sri Lanka represents perhaps the biggest challenge since 1971. Success will ensure that its regional status is commensurate with its size and geographical legacy. Failure will circumscribe India's diplomatic and military role for decades to come.

Considering the daunting odds, is India's regional game plan workable? Obviously, like the green signal given in New Delhi for IPKF operations, the strategy, at the present moment, seems to have a 50 per cent success ratio. But New

tacks, similar equipment stored in a special air-conditioned trailer is taken along. His aides in adjoining offices operate on computers and word processors.

The overall effect is spellbinding and Sundarji's command of the language and his strategic thinking have obviously impressed the political leadership and given the military a major say in foreign policy. His critics, and there are many even within the army, see his ambition as a flaw and have branded him a "death and glory boy", determined to secure his place in military history.

However, the army brass views him with something akin to awe and there is no denying that the man has tremendous charisma. Neither is he the maver-

ick, or the lack of it. If New Delhi prepared to face the collective suspicion of the neighbours, handle domestic problems and public opinion, it cannot do so effectively without that vital ingredient. More important perhaps is the need for the image of a strong India leadership in the international context. Mrs Gandhi was respected by international leaders for precisely that and there was consequently less resistance to her regional policies. Without a strong leadership, domestic stability and public support, New Delhi will be seriously hampered in its regional efforts. The stakes in Sri Lanka may be high but so is the risk of failure. As one general soberly admits: "If we fail, it will not be Rajiv's Waterloo but India's Waterloo."

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