

Defeat LTTE using guerrilla tactics

By our Military Analyst

Containment was a concept generated when Eelam War II broke out. The thinking was to erode the LTTE strength in the east and to maintain a low profile role in the north by merely reacting to the strikes of the LTTE.

Recent history has proved that this concept was disastrous. The Sri Lankan military has never lost so heavily in terms of political and military leaders, officers and men, weapons and equipment, airforce planes and naval vessels and camps and ground. On the contrary, the developments on the LTTE side has a strategic advantage to the LTTE.

This has been primarily because the LTTE was not actively engaged in the north and the LTTE had sufficient space and time to develop their offensive and defensive capability. Firstly, the LTTE has doubled its strength. The LTTE morale and motivation to fight has enhanced. Secondly, the LTTE has purchased internationally small artillery and anti aircraft missiles and expropriated from the Sri Lankan forces, weapons and equipment.

Thirdly, the LTTE has built both their domestic and their international infrastructure as well as enhanced their unique ability to operate in far away unfamiliar theatres like Colombo, India, Myanmar and in Europe, where they assassinated their opponents even in countries like France, Germany and Switzerland. Had the security forces concentrated on the East only for a short period at the outbreak of Eelam War II to reduce the LTTE strength and thereafter shifted a bulk of their troops to the North and struck Jaffna, the LTTE leadership would have been operating out of the jungles of Mullativu by this time.

The LTTE strategy in the East during Eelam War II was to pick down a bulk of the Sri Lankan forces in the East thereby preventing them from striking the north, particularly Jaffna, the heartland of the Tamils, where the LTTE enjoys substantial support. The eastern terrain was such that a relatively small number of LTTE cadres like 1200 could harass nearly 40,000 Sri Lankan operational troops.

In guerrilla warfare, one cannot clear an area because the insurgents are highly mobile. Wrong strategy costs thousands of lives. Since the Kumaratunga administration went to war with the Tigers, the Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte has been determined to strike the LTTE at its very heart. Excuse number one was the need to retrain troops. But in reality, although retraining was good, the troops that were in the field could have been deployed on offensive rather than defensive operations. A guerrilla should be best taken by surprise not by moving in large formations.

What is also needed is to deploy whatever number of troops that has been gathered in the north without waiting for a very heavy build up as the war against the LTTE is not a conventional war but an unconventional war. Unconventional wars - termed Low Intensity Operations - are wars



Tiger training an attempt to edge out government forces?

that have to be fought over a period of time.

By conducting one swift military operation, such wars cannot be won. On the contrary, one swift military operation will have some tactical advantage for the army, like they may be able to recover some ground, but strategically more people will join the LTTE as there would be more civilian casualties and destruction of property.

Further in a massive operation the element of surprise will be lost. The destruction to the LTTE will be less as they will either conduct a strategic retreat or at a moment when the Sri Lankan troops are at a disadvantage they will strike. The overall gain for the Sri Lankan government will

be low. If the Sri Lankan army is to win Eelam war III it will have no option but to conduct a number of small, limited operations towards Jaffna.

Therefore the Sri Lankan troops may have to be galvanized into an offensive mindset. There will be many young leaders who will be able to mobilize them into action. The ability to win Eelam War III depends on a few factors. First, motivation.

Today, Sri Lankan forces retain features of being a ceremonial force. Officers and men are promoted on seniority, not on merit. Whether an officer serves in an airconditioned office in Colombo or risks his life in the battle field, he will be promoted when the required number of years are

completed in service. Second, the Forward Defence Lines concept should be abolished.

The French, particularly the French Legion, that had extensive experience in fighting guerrilla wars throughout the world has condemned this concept. Troops are most effective when they are in offensive not defensive positions particularly when the element of surprise is exploited.

Third, invest more on men than on equipment. The success of the LTTE from a force of a few hundred into a force of a few thousand within a decade is largely due to the fact that they concentrate on training. This is the biggest incentive an army can give their men.

Troops who are well trained are naturally motivated. Instead of purchasing equipment that cannot be effectively used in an unconventional war, it is better to spend that money on intensely training the troops.

Fourthly, the right strategy should be not to capture territory but to kill as many LTTE cadres as possible inflicting minimum casualties on the civilians and on one's troops.

Unfortunately the military top brass is still thinking of fighting a guerrilla war, the same way they have trained to fight a conventional war with clear boundaries.

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