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## **Whither the Hybrid Threat?**

Lessons from Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

By Dr. Piyumi Kapugeekiyana

*Preparation for conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires serious consideration of the threat posed by non-state actors capable of hybrid warfare. Defined as a fused mix of conventional methods, irregular formations or tactics, terrorism and criminal disorder; hybrid warfare is unique for its synchronicity and fluidity of modes. Observers of contemporary hybrid actors like the Chechen rebels and the Hezbollah have been quick to remark upon the challenges posed by such multi-modal warfare. The threat concept is, however, heavily contested. A prominent criticism is that it describes a warrior with 'nearly mystical powers' – one that cannot possibly exist. Another bone of contention is that the hybrid threat represents a tactical problem with no relevance for strategists and policy-makers. Drawing upon digital archives detailing the activities of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during Sri Lanka's Eelam War IV campaign (2006-2009), this article argues otherwise.*

### **Old Wine in New Bottles**

One of the most vocal proponents of the hybrid threat concept – Frank Hoffman – defines the hybrid adversary as one that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the battle space. Contemporary actors like the Hezbollah and the Chechen rebels have been characterized as posing a unique threat to counterinsurgents – distinct from the purely irregular fighter and the wholly conventional challenger. Amongst detractors, however, there are several reasons why the threat construct has not been taken seriously.

For one, critics have pointed out that the fusion of modalities is hardly new. Great commanders throughout the ages have been challenged by the convergence of fighting techniques; particularly the use of guerrilla warfare in concert with a regular force. The American intervention in Vietnam is a case in point. Despite arguments that the modern hybrid threat is better equipped and more synchronous in its actions than similar opponents in wars past, many find the idea of a non-state actor highly proficient in multiple modes of warfare to be one that strains the bounds of reality. Even at best, hybrid warfare arguably centers on an emphasis on tactics, techniques and procedures – hardly a useful focus for policy-makers and strategists. Surely, military planners would be better served if they directed their energies towards more enduring national interests? The case of Sri Lanka's LTTE offers some interesting counterpoints.

### **The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**

The Sri Lankan Civil War evolved from the very real political grievances of the country's minority Tamil community. Wanting to secure an independent Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern

provinces of Sri Lanka, the LTTE engaged in four broad military campaigns or ‘Eelam Wars’: Eelam War I (1983-87), Eelam War II (1990-95), Eelam War III (1995-2002) and Eelam War IV (2006-09). Although the rebellion began with classic ‘hit and run’ guerrilla tactics, the Tigers had, by the final campaign, developed a fluidity that could best be characterized as hybrid warfare. In July 2007, when S. Puleedevan of the LTTE Peace Secretariat asserted: “*We can easily change our tactics and strategy from a conventional army to more of a guerrilla unit*”, his comments were not mere hyperbole. Despite Sri Lanka’s ultimate victory, the LTTE of Eelam War IV were multi-modal warriors that presented several challenges for defence planning.

### **A Nascent Air Wing**

The emergence of an aerial capability was the most striking development of the LTTE’s 2006-09 campaign. On 26 March 2007, the Tamil Eelam Air Force (TEAF) launched its first attack; targeting the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) base in Katunayake, Colombo. Between 2007 and 2009, the LTTE conducted ten verifiable strikes – mostly during the night – on Sri Lankan military and economic targets. The TEAF planes were highly-maneuvrable Czech Zlin two-seaters; modified to carry a payload of bombs on the fuselage and manned by bush pilots. Aside from the obvious psychological impact of these attacks, the emergence of a rebel aerial capability posed a regional security problem. In the wake of the LTTE’s first air strike, Indian authorities saw fit to place eight radars along their southern coast, deploy a team of Air Force personnel to monitor the skies, engage the Coast Guard in round-the-clock patrolling and post marine commandos at the forward observation post (FOP) near Tamil Nadu.

The successful use of Tiger planes in sorties across the country revealed several flaws in Sri Lanka’s air defence system. Seemingly primed to meet only the most basic of conventional threats to national security, Sri Lanka had deployed radars useful in the detection of inbound aircraft flying at high speeds and an altitude of at least 150 metres. The Zlin, however, had flown well below this range at an altitude of only 60 metres. Not only had Sri Lanka’s Indian-made Indra-2 radars installed at the SLAF base in Katunayake failed to detect the Zlin planes, but troops on the ground had also found it difficult to direct their anti-aircraft guns at such low-flying targets.

The rebels’ nascent aerial capabilities had been problematic enough as a stand-alone threat. However, as a hybrid actor, the LTTE had deftly fused air power alongside other capabilities. A prominent example was the September 2008 infiltration of the fortified *Vanni* Security Forces Headquarters (SFHQ) in Vavuniya. Ten cadres from the elite Black Tiger (suicide) unit had attempted to gain access to this complex under the cover of artillery fire and TEAF bombings; with the objective of procuring the exact grid reference of Sri Lankan Air Force radar towers and communicating this information via satellite phones to LTTE gunners on the ground. Although the mission was foiled, it became clear that the emergence of LTTE aerial capabilities did not merely reveal gaps in Sri Lanka’s air defence system. They also constituted a new operational challenge when used in concert with irregular forces and conventional weapons within the same battlespace.

## Land Warfare

The greatest proportion of LTTE activity during Eelam War IV, however, took the form of battles against the Sri Lankan Army – comprising individual combat action, skirmishes and small engagements. In their approach to land warfare, the LTTE set themselves apart from the average guerrilla warrior by building defensive fortifications known as ditch-cum-bunds (DCBs) to stall the advance of Sri Lankan infantry units. The DCBs consisted of ditches (6 feet deep and 12-14 feet wide) and earthen berms (1.5 km long, 12-14 feet tall) with concrete bunkers diffused along the stretch of the berm. Covered by rebel artillery and small-arms fire, these fortifications were employed both offensively and defensively to counter large-scale mechanized operations by the Sri Lankan military.

## Developments at Sea

Even with what may have appeared to be a poor man's navy, the Tigers thoroughly challenged military and commercial uses of the seas around Sri Lanka during Eelam War IV. When operating in Sri Lanka's territorial waters, the LTTE deployed their naval capabilities in at least four distinct ways: to attack targets at sea such as troop transports and cargo vessels; to attack targets on land such as naval encampments; to engage in direct combat with the Navy's special boat squadron (SBS) and rapid action boat squadron (RABS) and to transport fighters along the north-eastern coast.

Gun-battles between the Navy and the Sea Tigers were long-drawn-out affairs spanning several hours from the first point of interception. Although the Tigers utilized indigenously-made vessels, rebel attack craft like the four-man *Thrikka* class and the ten-man *Muraj* class were armed with machine guns and capable of reaching top speeds of approximately 45 knots. While endowed with the capacity to carry advanced precision naval weapons systems and highly manoeuvrable in the littoral environment, Sri Lankan Navy boats such as the Israeli-made Super Dvora Mark III only approached a top speed of 50 knots. The average LTTE attack involved the use of wolf-pack tactics which almost always necessitated the reinforcement of the Sri Lankan Navy's fast patrol boats by land and especially, air power. In the deep seas, the threat was different: large unregistered LTTE *Sea Pigeon* vessels sailing towards Sri Lankan waters from weapons hubs in the East and the West.

Ultimately, the Tigers' maritime capabilities transcended the usual typologies – they were not wholly guerrilla, wholly conventional or even wholly piratical in nature but a combination of various modes of warfare. The comprehensiveness of the LTTE threat in the naval domain only added to the lethality of their combined-arms tactics on land; providing for an overall effective hybrid threat. Altogether, rebel naval capabilities demanded an expansive approach to surveillance, interception and interdiction.

## **Irregular Tactics**

The fact that the LTTE possessed conventional weapons capabilities did not deter them from waging a ‘war stripped to the essentials’ at different points in the campaign. The extensive use of off-the-shelf and improvised claymores was a particular threat to the Sri Lankan military. U.S. troops in Baghdad may have had the luxury of leading troop patrols with a 70-ton M1 Abrams tank after being confronted in sectors rife with explosively formed penetrators (EFPs). In Sri Lanka’s North-East, however, troop transports – ordinary buses – were largely defended by steel armour plates bolted to the fronts of these vehicles. For a military stretched in resources and already tasked with responding to relatively conventional attacks across the domains of land, sea and air, it proved particularly challenging to confront an opponent that could so easily switch to irregular tactics.

## **Terrorist Activity**

Additionally, the average bombing in Colombo had been extraordinarily simple to execute. With at least 800,000 people visiting the capital daily by some form of vehicular transport, the city had been exceptionally vulnerable to LTTE ‘parcel’ bombs stowed away in car trunks and train compartments. The reach and lethality of terrorist methods in urban areas was especially heightened by the LTTE’s use of suicide bombers. At no point in the campaign had this been more evident than in the 2006 attempt on Army Commander Sarath Fonseka’s life – when a 21-year old female suicide bomber infiltrated the Sri Lankan Army’s own fortified headquarters in Slave Island and successfully detonated her payload to target the General’s convoy. The ease with which this attack was perpetrated constituted a strong indictment of the security measures in place. As one analyst remarked: *“This army chief was careful. He took precautions. He changed cars, routes. But the Tigers still blew him up in one of the most high-security zones in Colombo. If he awakes, he’ll be angry.”* The fact that the LTTE could keep up a steady combined-arms campaign in Sri Lanka’s North-East whilst engaging in irregular hit-and-run attacks on the military, bombings in civilian areas *and* suicide missions was a testament to their hybrid capabilities and the need for better intelligence-gathering in a number of areas.

## **Criminal Disorder**

The LTTE also distinguished itself as a technologically innovative hybrid non-state actor by establishing unauthorized access to Intelsat-12 – one in a fleet of some 52 satellites owned by the U.S. based *Intelsat*, the world’s largest commercial satellite communications provider. Having pirated an empty transpondence frequency on the satellite, the rebels utilized it to beam overseas broadcasts from the Television of Tamil Eelam and the Voice of Tigers radio programme. The LTTE’s successful piracy of a foreign-owned satellite – as a non-state actor with limited territorial goals and no state backing – makes it a lot harder to dismiss the sheer range of capabilities potentially exercised by the modern hybrid threat.

## Implications for Defence Planning

Albeit presented here as distinct categories, the LTTE's use of these multiple modalities of warfare was fused and adaptively mixed in time and space. Consequently, the implications of the rebels' hybrid campaign were felt in several areas. At the tactical and operational levels, the challenge of countering LTTE wolf-pack tactics at sea – in particular – signalled the need to reconsider the efficacy of traditional rules of engagement. At the strategic level, the LTTE's hybrid activities called for improvements in force structure to contend with the various threats presented across geographical sectors; training and education to manage the cognitive demands inherent in the ambiguous operating environment created by hybrid warfare; inter-agency cooperation to facilitate peace-keeping operations alongside fighting, and intelligence-gathering that encompassed traditional land, sea, air operations, suicide missions and transnational criminal activities. A full discussion of these implications is beyond the scope of this article.

For now, it is fair to say that further consideration is required with respect to the matter of whether hybrid threats merit addition to military intellectual discourse as a separate form of warfare. It is highly questionable whether other counterinsurgents will confront quite the same challenges that Sri Lanka faced during the Eelam War IV campaign. Even so, the implications of such warfare are worth reflection across the board. We can conclude that a purely threat-based approach to defence planning might not be the best way forward. But given the case of the LTTE, we must also question whether those who doubt the existence of hybrid warriors are actually in danger of a 'Cassandra complex' – dismissing concerns that are actually valid.

## Further Reading

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