

30 Years Later: Indian Peace Keeping Force 1987-90

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The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) organised a Webinar titled “30 Years Later: Indian Peace Keeping Force 1987-90” on May 27, 2020. Shri Hardeep Singh Puri, Hon’ble Minister for Civil Aviation, and for Housing & Urban Development, and Minister of State for Commerce & Industry, was the Guest Speaker at the event. Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General of MP-IDSA, moderated the discussion in which four other eminent panellists participated – Lieutenant General AS Kalkat, SYSM, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Commander of the Indian Peace Keeping Force; Brigadier N. K. Bahri, VSM (Retd), in-charge of IPKF’s logistics; Shri Shekhar Gupta; Founder and Editor of The Print; and, Shri Nitin Gokhale, Founder of Bharat Shakti. The following is a summary of the remarks made during the Webinar.

Ambassador Sujan R Chinoy

The IPKF was despatched to Sri Lanka as part of an effort to find a solution to the ethnic conflict between the Sinhala-dominated central government and Tamil militant groups demanding an independent Tamil Eelam.

The three-year mission had obvious costs. The main cost was the blood and treasure expended. Nearly 100,000 military and paramilitary personnel served in Sri Lanka during the IPKF’s 32-month deployment. 1,166 servicemen died, and some 3500 others suffered injury.

Were there any benefits of the intervention? Two main reasons impelled India to intervene. One was to prevent Sri Lanka from forging deeper defence and intelligence relationships with India’s regional adversaries, China and Pakistan, as well as with the United States with which India did not enjoy convergent interests during the Cold War years. This objective was indeed achieved at that time.

The second reason for the Indian intervention was to push through a solution to the ethnic conflict. India’s preferred solution was the merger of the Tamil-majority provinces and devolution of some powers to the new larger province, thus granting Tamils a measure of autonomous self-government. This solution was written into the India-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987. The Sri Lankan government at first abided by this provision by getting the 13th constitutional amendment passed through parliament. It was, however, a sore point among the majority Sinhala. In 2006, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court struck down the merger

of the two Tamil provinces. After the LTTE was crushed in 2008, the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime attempted to dilute the provisions of the 13th Amendment. But it did not succeed and the provincial council established in the late 1980s continues to function. If Sri Lanka were to persist with this experiment in devolving power to the provinces, thus addressing the aspirations of the Tamils, and if this experiment were to ensue in lasting peace, then the Indian intervention can be said to have been successful in the long term.

Against this backdrop, today's webinar will explore the drivers behind the deployment of the IPKF, how the deployment was conceived and executed, how the operational and logistical aspects of the deployment were handled, and, finally, the lessons learnt (and since then unlearnt).

Minister Hardeep Singh Puri

As a political officer at the Indian High Commission in Colombo during the late 1980s, Shri Hardeep Singh Puri was actively involved in the negotiation of the India-Sri Lanka Accord under which the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was sent to Sri Lanka in 1987. The IPKF was sent on a mission at a time when no operational doctrine was available in India on such peace keeping efforts. Despite this handicap, according to Minister Puri, IPKF performed fairly well, even if there were issues with the modalities of implementation of the mission on the ground.

Minister Puri argued that when Rajiv Gandhi came to power, he had three policy options available to him vis-à-vis Sri Lanka and the ethnic conflict there: 1) Continue Mrs Indira Gandhi's policy (of extending support for Tamil militants); 2) Adopt a hands-off policy; and, 3) Offer India's good offices to bring peace. Rajiv Gandhi, in his view, rightly chose to offer India's good offices.

According to Minister Puri, it was widely perceived that the continuation of Mrs Gandhi's Sri Lanka policy (supporting Tamil militancy) would have resulted, in the dismemberment of Sri Lanka and blood-bath in the Island, which, in turn, it was widely perceived, would have created deep trouble in Tamil Nadu. A 'hands-off' policy was also not an option at that point of time because of the kind of persecution the Tamil minority was being subjected to in Sri Lanka. Atrocities on Sri Lankan Tamils were also having negative repercussions in Tamil Nadu and among the Tamil diaspora. Due to its own security interests, India did not want either side in the ethnic conflict to take extreme action to the detriment of the other. Moreover, a 'hands-off' policy would have allowed India's adversaries an opportunity to fish in Sri Lanka's troubled waters, thereby affecting India's strategic interests. In such a context, Rajiv Gandhi took a wise decision to reverse Indira Gandhi's policy and provide India's 'good offices' to forge peace in Sri Lanka within the framework of its unity and territorial integrity. At the same time,

Rajiv Gandhi tried to extract for the Tamils minorities (both Sri Lankan and Indian) an agreement that would be broadly responsive to their aspirations.

Minister Puri recalled that sending a peace keeping force was not on the agenda when the original agreement was being negotiated. It was incorporated later, when General Sundarji agreed to oversee the implementation of the peace agreement and ensure that it would be respected by both the parties and especially by the Tamil outfits which were required to voluntarily surrender their arms as part of the ISLA in the interest of peace.

Even though India's action to send the IPKF to Sri Lanka was widely criticised and termed as 'Indian intervention', Shri Puri justified the presence of the IPKF on the ground that India did not send its troops uninvited. Both parties to the conflict in Sri Lanka voluntarily accepted India's good offices. Minister Puri also emphasised that the Peace Accord was signed by the executive heads of governments in India and Sri Lanka, instead of the two parties to the conflict, because the Sri Lankan Tamil groups themselves, and Prabhakaran himself, wanted India as a guarantor to the peace accord. Nonetheless, in hindsight, Minister Puri felt that neither party to the conflict was actually serious about peace. The IPKF could not make the Tamil outfits go beyond a symbolic surrender of arms because the Sri Lankan Government continued its offensive mission. There was a lack of sincerity on both sides.

Hence, in Minister Puri's view, the lesson to be learnt from the IPKF experience is that before such missions are planned, a proper assessment should be made about the disputants, especially whether they are sincere in their desire to achieve peace or simply trying to buy time.

Minister Puri concluded by saying that the IPKF mission was a good attempt despite the heavy price India had to pay. Not being party to the India-Sri Lanka Agreement would have made India regret not having taken any initiative to save the Tamils from decimation. He wished that the Indian political class could have been more resilient and allowed the IPKF to complete the task. In his view, the manner in which the IPKF had to wind down its mission was regrettable.

Minister Puri responded to several queries raised by participants in the webinar. On the question of contemporary thinking about 'use of force', both UN-led and unilateral, and whether India's decision to send IPKF to Sri Lanka could be compared with the US intervention in Afghanistan, Shri Puri said that there are only two situations in which force can be used, in self-defence and with UNSC authorisation. The world body is, however, divided on the issue of use of force. While the UNSC authorised the use of force in Libya, the resolution to use force in Syria was blocked by China and Russia thrice even when it was believed that a UN-led force could have prevented bloodshed in Syria. As for the US intervention in Afghanistan, the US periodically undertakes missions without permission from any other nation or world body. India, in contrast, had a proper

discussion with the leadership of Sri Lanka and sent the IPKF as part of a peace agreement at the invitation of the government of Sri Lanka. India fared quite well given the fact it was a maiden experience, and the decision to go for it was in line with Indian cultural and political ethos.

In response to a query as to what promise was made to Prabhakaran to convince him to come to Delhi, Shri Puri said that no promise was made. He emphasised that the Indian government did not promise at any point that it would countenance the establishment of an independent Eelam. When Shri Puri personally met Prabhakaran and shared the clauses which would figure in the peace agreement, the LTTE leader agreed to come to India on the condition that he travel with dignity and honour, and not as a fugitive. Shri Puri accompanied Prabhakaran who travelled from Velvettithurai to South India in an IAF helicopter. In Madras, Prabhakaran met MG Ramachandran alone. He was then brought to Delhi. By the time he reached Delhi, there was significant change in his tone and attitude. Prabhakaran came and went back willingly.

To another question as to why there was no outrage in India during the last Eelam War in the late 2000s, Shri Puri held that LTTE was finished as an organisation the minute it started attacking the Indian state. The worst manifestation of this was the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. That was the worst mistake the LTTE made and that lost them all leverage vis-a-vis the Indian state.

Lieutenant General AS Kalkat (Retd.)

Lieutenant General AS Kalkat began with a description of the IPKF flag to highlight the nature of the IPKF mission – a peacekeeping operation carried out by the joint services command of the Army, Navy and Air Force under the overall direction of the Government of India. Turning to the then prevalent situation in Sri Lanka, he said that the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil militant groups including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) initially welcomed the IPKF when it was inducted, on the assumption that they would be able to use the Indian force to further their own interests. However, when the IPKF proved to be impartial, it came to be opposed by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military. Consequently, India lost more than 1200 brave soldiers.

Gen. Kalkat recalled that after succeeding Jayewardene as Sri Lanka President in January 1988, Ranasinghe Premadasa threatened to use force against the IPKF if it did not confine itself to the barracks. Later, on at least two occasions after the IPKF's de-induction process began, Premadasa's office conveyed threats of attack on Indian soldiers by Sri Lankan forces. With no clear-cut direction issued by the Indian Prime Minister's Office, Gen. Kalkat devised his own ways to deal with these threats. He let it be known that he would order Indian soldiers to respond to any attack on them and even be compelled to expand the scope of the IPKF's mission beyond the North and East of the country.

According to Gen. Kalkat, the lesson to be learnt from the IPKF experience is that a political decision to send soldiers on a mission must be backed till the very end of the mission. Soldiers should not be left to their own devices. In his view, “it is not important how a conflict starts, it is important how it ends”. He emphasised the importance of being prepared to enforce a peace accord after concluding it. India, he opined, was not however ready at that time to take decisive action and enforce the accord when the parties to the conflict refused to honour it.

Gen. Kalkat mentioned that in the post-IPKF period India took a clear-cut decision not to provide military support in 2000 when then Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga sought assistance to decimate the LTTE. By then, LTTE had stopped acting as a guerrilla force and started fighting the Sri Lankan forces like a regular army. India advised that the Sri Lanka military, which was far superior to the LTTE, should deal with this manageable challenge on its own.

Shri Shekhar Gupta

Shri Shekhar Gupta argued that the events following the deployment of the IPKF do not so much constitute military history but political history. Whether the IPKF mission resulted in military victory or defeat is, in his view, a tactical question. The strategic question rather is whether India was ready to undertake such an intervention. The refusal of then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi to receive the returning IPKF contingent showed that India was not mature enough to carry out an intervention of that kind.

In Shri Gupta’s view, while there was some merit in embarking upon the intervention, India lacked the institutional commitment to sustain the mission. In this regard, he recalled then Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit’s realisation within 72 hours of the beginning of operations against the LTTE that India was not mentally prepared to be a great power. A great power does not stop pursuing national and strategic objectives because of a change in government, but continues with the mission because of the existence of a larger national consensus that is supported by public opinion. According to Shri Gupta, the Rajiv Gandhi government failed to generate a national consensus and popular support. Moreover, by the end of 1987, it did not have political capital to expend on a foreign adventure. Its successor, the government led by V. P. Singh, followed a completely different Sri Lanka policy given its commitment to oppose whatever its predecessor had done. Further, the VP Singh government was constrained by its dependence for survival on the political support extended by politicians from Tamil Nadu who were averse to the continuation of the IPKF mission.

With reference to Gen. Kalkat’s point about the government fully backing up to the very end soldiers sent overseas, Shri Gupta argued that the IPKF should have been brought back much earlier as both parties to the dispute were opposed to it.

He noted that “the military often looks at a situation from a military point of view”, whereas the fact was that IPKF was a political move. Once the political move lost its meaning, IPKF should have been withdrawn after issuing a statement of mission accomplished, instead of viewing it as a political-military retreat. In his view, political naiveté, military arrogance and the political betrayal by the VP Singh Government were what led India into trouble as far as the IPKF was concerned. The lesson to be learnt from the IPKF mission is never to be contemptuous of and underestimate the enemy.

Brigadier N. K. Bahri (Retd.)

Brigadier Bahri explained the handling of the logistical aspect of the IPKF mission. He pointed out that the IPKF mission was the first overseas mission that Indian armed forces had embarked upon since World War II. As a result, no heed had been paid to the need for organisational preparedness for overseas military missions. Although the IPKF mission was a bit hasty and disorganised in the beginning, the learning was fast and midway through an almost perfect logistical system was put in place. This experience will stand the armed forces in good stead during future overseas missions.

Brigadier Bahri pointed out the immense logistic challenges involved in transporting men and material due to limited port facilities in the Sri Lankan ports of Kankesanthurai and Trincomalee. In the absence of adequate port facilities, ad hoc means were adopted to load and unload cargo. Further, IPKF had to use unsafe roads for transporting men and *materiel* because of the absence of suitable craft to carry them along the coast.

The procurement policy formulated for the IPKF mission – sourcing all material requirements in India – placed the Navy in a disadvantageous position in terms of acquiring the right kind of shipping since there was hardly any passenger shipping. As a result, the IPKF came to rely on the Indian Air Force to ship soldiers and material in and out of the island, even though it was a bit costly.

Another problem that dogged the logistics system was the organisational set up. The IPKF headquarter was raised only in April 1988 by when the bulk of the operations in Jaffna was over. In the absence of a joint service command, IPKF was under two different commands. While operations, intelligence, and civil affairs were under the Delhi Head Quarter command, logistics was under Southern Command. This introduced a hiatus between the two Commands at times.

At the time of its de-induction, the IPKF command had to sort out several issues such as: *ex gratia* payment to owners whose houses were taken on rent but could not be located at that time; deciding the fate of the 2200 Prisoners of War who were in the IPKF’s custody; and, what to do with the captured equipment. Finally,

although de-induction of the IPKF was itself a challenging task, the necessary coordination was achieved without any hitch.

Shri Nitin Gokhale

Shri Nitin Gokhale focused on the Fourth Eelam War in Sri Lanka during 2006-2009 when government forces achieved a decisive victory. Earlier, Sri Lankan forces had fought three wars with Tamil militants with the first of these occurring before the IPKF went in. He highlighted the significant differences between how previous governments had dealt with the conflict and the Mahinda Rajapaksa government's handling of the war. President Rajapaksa clearly spelt out the politico-military objective of eliminating the LTTE militarily and fully backed the military in this endeavour. Further, he garnered diplomatic support from China and Russia as well as intelligence assistance from India and United States.

For its part, the Sri Lankan military determinedly pursued the politico-military objective set under the political supervision of Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa who ensured complete synergy among the three services. The Air Force and the Navy, which were marginal players in the previous three wars, were brought to the fore to play a significant role in Eelam War IV. With the help of the intelligence provided by India and the United States, the Sri Lankan forces were able to destroy LTTE armouries as well as prevent fresh weapons supplies from reaching the rebels.

Shri Gokhale noted that the Sri Lankan forces were in an advantageous position during Eelam war IV also due to the strategic mistakes made by the LTTE. The first LTTE mistake was to fight like a conventional army, as opposed to the guerrilla tactics it had employed in previous phases. The group tried to hold territory with limited resources. It also under-estimated the Sri Lankan military and did not appear to have realised that the latter had fundamentally changed its approach, strategies and tactics. Another major mistake of the LTTE was, however, keeping 300,000 civilians with it and going back with these hostages to the narrow areas in Mullaitivu. The final strategic mistake the LTTE made was to overlook the new international reality that emerged post 9/11, when tolerance for terrorism in the name of fight for freedom evaporated.

Shri Gokhale also observed that the Sri Lankan Government managed to win the battle of narratives by creating a fire-wall around northern Sri Lanka and not allowing any LTTE message or news to seep out. This enabled it to avert international pressure and control the narrative since it was the only source of news. The near absence of a narrative from the LTTE allowed the Sri Lankan government a free hand to do what it did in the final phase of the war. Thus, one of the lessons to emerge from the last phase of Sri Lanka's war against the LTTE was the importance of the management of perceptions.

India's discreet support to the war efforts of the Sri Lankan Government played a crucial role in the victory of Sri Lankan forces. A 3+3 mechanism consisting of India's Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary and National Security Advisor, on one side, and Gotabaya and Basil Rajapaksa and Lalith Weeratunga, on the other, was set up to exchange regular views on issues related to the war. Mahinda Rajapaksa also addressed India's concerns by slowing down operations towards the last stage of war in the last week of April and early May 2009 when India was going through Parliamentary election campaign and launching the final assault on the LTTE after voting had ended. There was thus tremendous coordination between India and Sri Lanka to ensure smooth military operation during the last phase of war.

Finally, comparing the IPKF mission with Eelam war IV, Gokhale pointed out that the key difference lay in the clear politico-military objective that was given to the Sri Lankan forces. In his view, victory is not possible until and unless there is a clear-cut political objective and the political will to implement it.

Transcribed by Dr. Gulbin Sultana, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA.