Use of Ideology and Technology in Terrorist Warfare in the Sri Lankan Conflict

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LTTE Ideology

Since its formation in 1972 until its defeat in May 2009, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorist organization did not propose anything other than the demand for "Tamil Eelam", a unitary, independent state for ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. Thus, it can be asserted that there was no transformation in the core ethno-nationalist ideology of the LTTE throughout its existence. Since its inception, the LTTE also adopted a "suicide ideology" and an "ideology of revenge" alongside its central ethno-nationalist ideology. Its ideology was sometimes conflated with the globalized ideology of socialism for strategic reasons, i.e. to dupe its members, foreign governments, and the international community to gain support.[1]

The LTTE's ethno-nationalist narrative included an invented Tamil homeland in the north and east of Sri Lanka and the fabrication of the historical facts of Sri Lanka, while accepted anthropological research holds that all parts of the island were multi-ethnic from its earliest recorded history[1]. LTTE ideology also included the demonizing of the Sinhalese and Muslim communities of Sri Lanka and the denying of political and social developments in Sri Lanka in the past 40 years. The LTTE's political strategy included investing in an international propaganda arm which consistently produced (and continues to produce) misinformation and false news reports about Sri Lanka. The LTTE's ethno-nationalist ideology was (easily) used to indoctrinate and radicalize the major segment of the Tamil population in the conflict-affected North and East, who were forcibly separated from the rest of the country's population for decades. First and second generation pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora residing mainly in Western countries also supported and continues to propagate the LTTE's ethno-nationalist ideology for different reasons: members of the first generation Tamil diaspora harbour painful memories of Sri Lanka due to the ethnic riots of the 1980s, while members of the second generation diaspora accept the LTTE's ethno-national ideology, never having lived in Sri Lanka to experience its traditional ethnically harmonious culture nor its political and social policy developments in the past decades with no ethnically discriminatory policies currently in place.

While there was no shift in ideology, there was great evolution in the LTTE's terror tactics over the years. The LTTE's increasing attacks on civilians and the lack of concern for civilian causalities, attacks on members of the Sri Lankan military, and attacks on key economic and transport infrastructure, unambiguously identified it as a terrorist organization. The culture of the LTTE reflected the personality of its autocratic leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran[1]: disciplined, callous, draconian, and vindictive. For example, the act of suicide was glorified within the LTTE to signify commitment to the Tamil separatist cause. Self-destruction by LTTE fighters was seen as a form of martyrdom. The suicide ideology of the LTTE evolved to each member wearing a cyanide capsule around her/his neck to be swallowed if captured by the enemy, i.e. the Sri Lankan government's security forces. The suicide ideology of the LTTE has been compared to that of a religious cult where members of a cult would drink poison if

prompted by the cult leader.[1] The top-down pyramid power structure with Prabhakaran at the apex with all the decision-making power, has also been compared to the official religion of the Third Reich.[1] In fact, Prabhakaran purposefully cultivated an image of a demi-god among LTTE members, and was thus perceived and revered as such by them. Meeting him in person was considered a boundless honour, and a Black Tiger (suicide bomber) was granted the prize of having her/his last supper with the leader.[1]

Revenge was a part of the LTTE's ideology,[1] as killings and assassinations by the LTTE in most cases were committed as part of a vendetta. Such attacks were strategically counterproductive to the advancement of the LTTE's goals in some cases, with the suicide bomber assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Former Prime Minister of India, serving as a primary example. Terrorist attacks such as these, which were undertaken principally for revenge and retribution, are viewed as a part of the LTTE's radical ideology, rather than an emotional reaction on the part of the LTTE leadership.[1] This ideology of revenge transformed into draconian measures for disloyalty or Tamil political opposition. Anyone who was suspected of disloyalty was swiftly terminated, as done with Mahattaya, Prabhakaran's former long-time second-in-command.[1] Tamil political opposition to the LTTE was not tolerated, and the LTTE systematically assassinated more than forty prominent mainstream Tamil politicians in Sri Lanka.[1]

In the early years, the LTTE posed itself as a socialist one-party movement in which the rigid Hindu caste system and gender discrimination of the traditional Tamil (Hindu) culture was done away with. However, in actuality the LTTE did not embrace socialism or egalitarianism sincerely, but only to the extent which supported Prabhakaran's military dictatorship and terrorist movement. For example, although the caste system was rejected, Prabhakaran was known to have favoured other Christian (Catholic) Tamils for leadership positions within the organization.[1] Also, although there was no gender bias in recruitment and training, wounded or disabled female LTTE combatants were sexually abused, and qualities traditionally positively attributed to women such as pacifism and the quality of nurturing were rejected entirely by the movement. Transnational terrorist activists of the LTTE continue to spread the LTTE's pseudo-socialist ideology strategically. For example, the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) pro-LTTE organization expressed the desire to send in its delegations to socialist Latin American countries which traditionally have strong diplomatic ties with the Sri Lankan government. In September 2011, Prime Minister of the TGTE, Visuvanathan Rudrakumaran said: "Tamils always looked upon Fidel and Che as heroes…Our people are shocked by Cuba's position since May 2009. Perhaps it is due to poor communication. We want to send a delegation to Cuba, to Venezuela, to ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Latin America) and other governments to explain our position and to engage in dialogue."[1]

LTTE Technology

The LTTE terrorist group was a "technologically innovative" organization.[1] The LTTE began with just 40 members and 25 weapons,[1] but grew to be the world's most capable terrorist organization. The LTTE was the only non-state actor in the world with a military, sea and (lesser) air capability, an international funds and arms supply network, an international political office, and a highly secretive international intelligence network.

Weapons Technology:

LTTE terror tactics employed in seeking a separate state included more than 400 suicide attacks in Sri Lanka.[1] Not only was the LTTE the inventor of the human bomber, the LTTE developed what has been described as "suicide bomb technology". The LTTE's suicide vest design with C-4 explosives has been copied by many terrorist organizations in the world.[1] The LTTE also pioneered the suicide naval attack in January 1999, seven years before the USS Cole attack by Al Qaeda.[1] The LTTE has carried out approximately 60 naval attacks in total.[1] The LTTE was also the only non-state actor to acquire aircrafts and launch attacks. Although the LTTE's air capability was rudimentary, it carried out nine aerial attacks from March 2007 and February 2009, which included a kamikaze style attack in 2009 during the height of the conflict in Sri Lanka.[1]

The LTTE's other innovations used in battle are the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and the Johnny mine,[1] which have also widely influenced other terrorist groups in the world. The LTTE used weapons in its guerrilla and conventional warfare which included small arms, AK 47 rifles, TNT/ RDX/ C-4 explosives, anti-aircraft weapons, and 81mm mortar ammunition. Significantly, close to its defeat in 2009, the LTTE sought to acquire nuclear weapons.[1]

ICT and Other Technologies:

The LTTE effectively leveraged information communication technologies (ICTs) including new satellite technology to connect its extensive international network of commercial companies and small businesses, informal banking channels, a fleet of ships, political offices, front organizations, arms dealers, and foreign mercenaries. The LTTE also used ICTs including (new) social media platforms to effectively disseminate propaganda and raise funds among the Tamil diaspora and international public. The remaining factions of the LTTE and LTTE front organizations continue to make use of these established networks and systems.

The LTTE has been utilizing the power of the media since the 1980s, as it began operating clandestine radio and television stations to broadcast its messages to the Tamil communities in the North and East of Sri Lanka. In the 1990s and 2000s, the internet was used by the LTTE to effectively coordinate its propaganda network from bases mainly in Western countries,[1] so as to make use of the technical infrastructure in place as well as to sway international public opinion. Pro-LTTE diaspora groups also have websites for promoting misinformation regarding the Sri Lankan conflict and the history of Sri Lanka, while also overtly promoting Tamil culture. These websites also have forums in which Tamils across the world discuss and consolidate opinions regarding politics in Sri Lanka.[1] Tamilcanadian.com is one of the biggest and most influential diaspora websites,[1] disseminating misinformation about Sri Lanka.

In March 2005, the LTTE acquired satellite technology by procuring the Intelsat-12 transponder through a third party commercial contract, as Intelsat was hesitant to break the contract midway.[1] The Intelsat-12[1] satellite, in geosynchronous orbit over the Indian Ocean, then began to broadcast the "National Television of Tamil Eelam" propaganda channel and "Pulikalin Kural" ("Voice of Tigers") radio transmission throughout South Asia.[1]

It is believed that the uplink transmissions were probably done from a secret location in Vavuniya in the then LTTE-controlled northern part of Sri Lanka. These channels were accessible to the 30,000 Sri Lankan citizens with a Direct to Home (DTH) satellite dish.[1] The National Television of Tamil Eelam (11.5GHz) reached India, parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and China for two hours daily between 13:30 - 15:30 GMT.[1] The Paris-based "Tamil Television Network" (TTN) satellite broadcast channel reached Europe and the Middle East at 18:00 GMT.[1] However, after it was demonstrated that transmission content glorified terrorism and violence, Intelsat decided to approach the original contract party and end the LTTE's transmission in April 2007.[1] The LTTE's use of satellite technology was the first by a terrorist organization.

In May 2007, the LTTE launched its second pay TV channel, "Tharishanam" ("Revelation"), on the "Makkal Television Tamil" satellite channel of Chennai, India.[1] The LTTE also had plans to transmit a second TV channel to Europe as a client of France's Globecast.[1] This was to be up-linked through the Israeli Satlink platform in the Hotbird 8 Satellite.[1] Information communication technologies (ICTs) and manufacturing technology were also used in other criminal activities of the LTTE, including cloning of credit cards and other forms of credit card fraud.[1]

Conclusion

The effective use of ideology and technology enabled the LTTE terrorist organization not only to survive for three decades, but successfully exploit the international system and gain political legitimacy outside of Sri Lanka. The LTTE was ultimately defeated by the Sri Lankan security forces with the use of superior military strategy and technology. The adoption of two counter-ideologies by the state also assisted in gaining domestic support for the war against the LTTE: (1) patriotism to defend the sovereignty of Sri Lanka and (2) the promotion of a national identity of "being Sri Lankan" as opposed to deriving one's identity from one's ethnicity. The patriotic sentiment of the government resonated most among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority who care for the survival of their ethno-religious group in a predominately Dravidian and Hindu region. The state's promotion of the national "Sri Lankan" identity, which is also very much part of the historically multi-ethnic island, was valued by all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. The post-conflict state policy changes promoting reconciliation such as the Trilingual Language Policy, which in its first phase made the study of Sinhalese, Tamil, and English compulsory in all public primary schools, was commended by all Sri Lankans. However, the Sri Lankan state's capacity and efforts in using ideology and technology to counter LTTE ideology internationally have always been lacking. Although the LTTE was defeated militarily in Sri Lanka in May 2009, LTTE terrorist cells and propaganda units survive internationally and seek to bring international action against the Sri Lankan state. In countering the continued LTTE's calculated worldwide propaganda and misinformation campaign through the use of ICTs and international media, the Sri Lankan state must develop the capacity to produce a sustained stream of counter-ideological media products and adopt strategic public relations campaign abroad. Being passive, traditional, and distant in international communications, in the face of an active, innovative, and networking enemy, is not the solution for the Sri Lankan government, if it is to genuinely pursue a sustainable peace for Sri Lanka.

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