CHAPTER V

THE USE OF AIR POWER IN THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT WITH LTTE

The ethnic conflict between the Liberation of Tamil Tigers for Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government is one of the longest ethnic conflicts of modern times. The conflict owes its origin to both a perceived and actual neglect of the aspirations of the Tamil minority residing in Northern and North Eastern Sri Lanka comprising the Jaffna Peninsula, Killinochi, Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomalee (refer map below).

![Map of Sri Lanka](image)

**Fig-5.1 Map of Sri Lanka**

The initial secular thrust of the Sri Lankan government in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a more sectarian approach to nation building in the 1970s, with an emphasis on the dominance of the Sinhala community, Sinhalese language and Buddhism as a religion. The conflict, which started off in the late 70s as a civilized and legitimate protest by an ethnic minority (Tamils) against an

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65 Taken from CD ROM of Encarta 2006, Maps of South Asia, as on 25 Sep 2007
established state, flared up into a military conflict in 1983 when the LTTE officially declared their goal for the Eelam (Independence). The two main protagonists in the conflict were the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state. Increasing violence and belligerence of the Prabhakaran led LTTE resulted in the declaration of an emergency in Sri Lanka in 1985 and scope for misunderstanding between New Delhi and Colombo. Inevitably, India gradually got drawn into the conflict due to two main reasons. Firstly, the proximity of Northern Sri Lanka comprising the Jaffna peninsula and Mannar to the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu precipitated a continuous influx of both refugees and militants into Tamil Nadu, creating a security problem for India. Secondly, Sri Lanka’s stability has always been vital to India’s strategic depth around its oceanic southern flank. Any instability in Sri Lanka without a suitable response from India could have invited attention from other global players like Pakistan, China and USA; something that India wanted to avoid at all costs. A friendly or even neutral Sri Lanka was what India was looking for. Therefore, India had to lay down a threshold for itself, after which it was bound to step in to assist in conflict mitigation and, if the need arose, in conflict termination too. The mid 1980s saw an extremely aggressive LTTE take on the Sri Lankan defence forces with some success leading to extreme instability in the region, and the possibility of Sri Lanka asking Pakistan or China or the US for help in stemming the expanding insurgency. This was when India stepped in and offered to broker a sustained peace agreement and pave the way for a peaceful solution to the ethnic crises. The Indo-Sri Lanka accord of 29 Jul 87 was the result of this strategic gamble by India. Based on the initial mandate, the thrust of the agreement focused on the following aspects from an Indian point of view

- Prevention of any forces detrimental to India’s strategic interests from acquiring bases and gaining a foothold in Sri Lanka.
• Neutralising the centrifugal forces that were activated in Tamil Nadu in the wake of the ethnic conflict.
• Separating the belligerents viz the Sri Lanka Armed Forces (SLAF) and the LTTE to pre-1987 positions.
• Implementing and enforcing a ceasefire within 24 hours of signing the accord. This warranted a surrender of weapons by the LTTE within 72 hours.

The initial euphoria with which the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was received in Sri Lanka wore out very soon because of the reluctance of the LTTE to lay down arms and the hesitant approach of the Sri Lankan Forces to comply with the terms of the agreement in both letter and spirit. This resulted in the alteration of the military objectives of the IPKF from Peacekeeping to Peace Enforcement, which inevitably saw an escalation of hostilities between the LTTE and IPKF, something that the IPKF was not really prepared for. With the ‘proxy war’ in J & K not yet having gained momentum, the experience of the Indian Armed Forces in dealing with Irregular or Unconventional Warfare was restricted to the ongoing Counter Insurgency Operations in the North East against relatively small and disorganized militant groups and operations against militant groups in Punjab that culminated in Operation Blue Star in 1984. 1987 was actually the first time that the Indian Army (IA) and Indian Air Force (IAF) came up against a well armed, well trained and tactically proficient guerilla force; the LTTE.

Air Power in Action

The above aspect of the baptism of the IAF in a full-fledged counter-insurgence makes it important to analyse how it coped with this ‘unconventional scenario’.

67 This is a term used by India to describe the Pakistani assisted insurgency in Jammu & Kashmir, and acts of terrorism perpetrated in various parts of India by Jehadi groups with roots in Pakistan.
It is also important to analyse how the use of air power in Sri Lanka has increased over the last 20 years and assess its relevance and effect on an unconventional conflict. In furtherance of this aim, the article would deal with three distinct phases of the utilization of air power in Sri Lanka.

- The first phase would be the employment of air power in Op Pawan by the IAF from July 87 to Mar 90.
- A brief mention would be made of the period between Mar 90 and beginning of 2006 which saw the emergence of the LTTE’s air wing and the growing capability of the Sri Lanka AF (SAF).
- The last phase of bitter fighting in 2008-09 would form the chronological culmination of the study of the air war between the LTTE and Sri Lankan AF. This portion would also be the most contemporary in terms of similarities with a number of ongoing conflicts.

Certain doctrinal issues would emerge that highlight the growing effectiveness of air power in breaking the will and resistance of non-state actors who challenge the authority and legitimacy of the state. The most controversial issue that restricts the use of air power in Low Intensity Conflict Operations (LICO) and Counter-Insurgency operations (COIN) viz. its potential for escalation would also be discussed briefly and a question will be asked using the Sri Lankan template – Can escalation caused by the utilization of offensive air power in an unconventional scenario ultimately lead to de-escalation and conflict termination? Air power in the hand of non-state actors does not really serve the purpose of limiting the scope of an ‘unconventional war’. It only strengthens the hand of the state and allows it to unleash it’s entire range of offensive military capability that includes air power. That is exactly what happened in Sri Lanka. It is opined that the increasing use of airpower resulted in decisive conflict termination with SLAF continuing to target the LTTE leader
Prabhakaran, keeping him on the run and preventing him from exercising the kind of unfettered command and control that has been possible over the last 25 years.

**Early Years**

Before dissecting the use of air power during Op Pawan it is important to throw some light on the state of the SLAF during the early eighties. The SLAF was poorly equipped to fight a counterinsurgency and needed some Israeli help in a modernization campaign that saw the induction of some light fixed wing ac like the Italian SF.260 and Bell 212 helicopters\(^68\). These ac were used in fire-support missions, foremost amongst which was an attack on an LTTE ammo dump in Jaffna in 1986. This was followed by attacks against LTTE bases in China Bay and an integrated assault on Jaffna town with commandoes supported by helicopters. It can be said that by 1986, a re-structured and re-organized SLAF, with its modest fire power, contributed in no small measure to an eminent Sri Lankan victory against the LTTE. This was when India decided to step in correctly assessing that it was only a matter of time before another external player would step in to assist the Sri Lankan armed Forces in defeating the LTTE and undermining its influence in the region.

**OP PAWAN-IPKF OPERATIONS**

For almost three years from 04 Jun 1987, when Operation Poomalai (humanitarian air drop over Jaffna)\(^69\) was executed to 24 Mar 1990, when the IPKF withdrew from Sri Lanka, the IAF played a significant role in continuous support of the country’s largest expeditionary armed force in its history. It was

\(^{68}\) Tom Cooper with Sam Wickramasinghe, India Sub-continent Data Base, Sri Lanka since 1971,Oct 29,2003 from www.ACIG.org, accessed on 29 Dec.07

also the first integrated experience in fighting a guerilla force that was trained and fought along conventional lines from within an unconventional environment viz jungle terrain and the built up urban environment of Jaffna. Following an accord between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments, Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations were undertaken against the LTTE in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. The accord was originally designed for peace keeping, with the expectation that the LTTE would lay down arms and the Sri Lankan forces would observe the ceasefire. However, the operations quickly took on the shape of peace-enforcement and then war due to political infighting and instability over various issues. In the ensuing conflict, the original objectives were redefined. While the IPKF aimed for forcible disarmament of the militants, the LTTE aimed for an all out war against the IPKF. The IPKF was faced with the guerrilla tactics and suicide attacks in an unfriendly environment, inhospitable terrain, belligerent locals and apathetic Sri Lankan defence forces. In the course of the war, limited success against the LTTE was obtained at considerable loss to the Indian Army, which later led to the withdrawal of the IPKF in 1990.

Since the IPKF mission was originally a peacekeeping mission, the initial task for the Air Force was only strategic and tactical airlift. These were achieved in the initial phase without any opposition due to the nature of the accord. However, once fighting broke out, airborne operations and casualty evacuation became the prime roles. Once the rules of engagement were relaxed, helicopter gun ships were pressed into action with Cheetah helicopters as scouts. During the 32 months of operations some 70,000 sorties were carried out with no loss to enemy action or accident, a matter of great professional satisfaction for the IAF. The main aircraft types involved in Sri Lanka were An-

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32 medium lift transport aircraft, Mi-8 medium lift helicopters and Mi-25 helicopter gunships. Also taking an active part in the operation were the Indian Army's Chetak and Cheetah light utility helicopters and the Indian Navy's Chetak helicopters and Alize turbo-prop fighters. The first air action took place on 04 Jun 87, when five An-32 transport aircraft, escorted by four Mirage 2000 fighters, air-dropped some 24 tonnes of relief supplies over selected zones in the Jaffna Peninsula that was cut off in the bitter fighting between advancing SriLankan security forces and the LTTE. The operation was conducted as a humanitarian gesture in response to an SOS from common citizens of Jaffna and growing international concern. Thereafter, within hours of the signing of the accord on 29 Jul 97, some 24 An 12 and An 32 tactical transport aircraft flew into Palalay Airfield near Jaffna town in the north of the island. These, with the bulk of two Indian Army battalions, constituted the 'peacekeeping force'. Op Pawan' was launched in first week of October to disarm the LTTE forcefully. However, the rules of engagement for IPKF were extremely stringent with severe restrictions placed on the use of artillery, heavy weaponry and offensive air support. This was done to ensure minimum civilian casualties and damage to property. When peacekeeping changed to combat, the initial offensive by a single Indian brigade followed five different axes leading into Jaffna town. A bold attempt was made to capture the LTTE leadership by inducting para-commandos into the university area by Mi-8 helicopters, but this costly operation was aborted with heavy casualties amongst the troops and a number of helicopters damaged. The prime operational base for the overstretched IPKF was Palalay airfield, where dozens of Mi-8 and Chetak helicopters, and An 32 and HS 748 transport aircraft were based, all of which had to be protected against LTTE raiders. Additional troops and equipment from various cantonments in India as well as from Trincomalee and Batticaloa in Sri Lanka.

were flown in using IL-76, AN-12, AN-32, HS 748, and civil Boeing 737 aircraft. Additional Mi-8 helicopter units arrived from air bases in India, supplemented by Cheetah helicopters for reconnaissance and casevac. The most formidable additions were the Mi-25 helicopter gunships. It is estimated that during the 20 days from 11 to 31 October 87 some 2,200 tactical transport and 800 assault helicopter sorties were carried out to fly in troops, weapons, vehicles, stores and various other equipment, and fly out the mounting casualties to military hospitals.

During the second half of Oct 87 the IAF carried out more transport and helicopter sorties in support of the ground forces than at any similar period of time in the history of the country's armed forces. Mi-25 gunships were employed to interdict the movement of militants from the Jaffna Peninsula to the neighbouring islands and mainland of Sri Lanka, as the LTTE attempted to bring in reinforcements of personnel and logistics and later on, to exfiltrate its cadres from Jaffna. Additionally, Mi-25s were used in the lagoon areas to destroy militant boats and vehicles\(^\text{74}\). The first use of Mi-25s for close air support was on 29 Oct when Mi-25s attacked LTTE entrenchments 32 km east of Jaffna with rocket and cannon fire. This action enabled army battalions to overwhelm the last resistance and affect a link-up. In another action, Mi-8 helicopters flew Para commandos in to areas on the western part of the peninsula and on to islands to engage LTTE strongholds. Mi-25s patrolling the key roads destroyed a number of LTTE vehicles. It is evident that in the entire IPKF campaign, the army was suitably supported by the Air Force in all possible roles by the transport aircraft and helicopters. Though the air environment was conducive for all transport operations involving para drops, air landed operations, Special Heliborne Operations (SHBO) and casevac, they were nonetheless fraught with danger from enemy fire below 2000 feet altitude. In the later part of conflict, suitable reconnaissance sorties were flown with

\(^{74}\) Op Cit, Pushpindar, n.72, accessed on 13 Jan 08
available intelligence inputs to gather more information on the enemy hideouts before carrying out any of these operations. The Cheetah helicopters were used in the scout role to direct the gunships accurately onto the known hideouts. Interdiction of supply and communication lines was effectively carried out in this manner. The roles of SHBO and casualty evacuation were supported by gunships to minimise the ground threat. Search and strike operations on opportunity targets were carried out frequently in different sectors of the conflict. The army cordons were tightened with patrolling sorties by the gunships, thus forcing the enemy to operate only by night.

Key Lessons from Op Pawan

The advantages of air power were exploited during IPKF operations in conditions of total air superiority. However, the concept of operations was different from classical conventional operations. There was no requirement of counter air operations and the role of fighters was minimal throughout. At the same time, transport and helicopter operations were operating under severe limitations common to small wars, with fleeting enemy in hostile surroundings. Challenges involved difficult terrain, unfriendly locals and urban operations, with restrictive rules of engagement that prohibited attacks that might hurt civilians or damage buildings. The mobile and fleeting nature of targets meant ineffective fire unless area targets like enemy camps or HQ were discovered. Meanwhile there were significant limitations in ability to gather intelligence, conduct night reconnaissance and conduct night attack, in terms of tactics and equipment. Political constraints early in the war greatly restricted effective use of air power. The rules of engagement also prevented any forcible disarmament in the initial stages of the accord. The policy was of nil collateral damage and no damage to civil property. The irony was that the enemy was deeply entrenched in the local population and their dwellings. Thick jungles and
equally thick urban centres were the prime locations of the enemy. This complicated navigation, reconnaissance, target identification and acquisition. Lack of force landing fields was major concern for the helicopter operations. Helicopters were compelled to fly low for target acquisition, thus inviting small arms fire. Consequently, reconnaissance mission altitudes had to be increased, which in turn led to decreased mission effectiveness.

Accurate intelligence has always been the key to successful airborne assault, Special Heliborne Operations (SHBO) and targeting against fleeting targets. The IPKF operations were marred by lack of intelligence on the enemy disposition, due to the huge local support enjoyed by the LTTE. The mistrust between the IPKF and the Sri Lankan forces added to that effect. Even though the LTTE did not have equipment capable of intercepting air to air and air to ground communication, they always managed to intercept the army’s communications, thus always being informed in advance. This led to many SHBO and gunship missions falling short of achieving their aim. All reconnaissance sorties were visual only, eliminating night reconnaissance efforts. Moving on to aircraft and equipment, helicopters were ill-equipped in navigation and targeting aids. There was no armour protection for the Mi-8 and Cheetah helicopters, nor were they equipped for night operations. Target acquisition was by visual means, undermining the rate of success. There was no provision or thought given to fitment of searchlights onto helicopters, which completely prohibited any night search and patrolling. Finally, there were no precision weapons or any stand off capability with the helicopters. A study of the environment and the limitations of air power under which the operations were conducted in Sri Lanka bring out several lessons. Joint planning at all levels of war is imperative. The use of fighter aircraft for photo reconnaissance missions at regular intervals could have resulted in a major show of force in addition to increased intelligence inputs. Inadequate intelligence led to the under-estimation of opposition at Jaffna university and turned out to be the main
reason for the failure of the operation despite the heroics of the Para Commandoes, 30 Sikh LI and pilots of the four Mi-8 helicopters from 125 Helicopter Unit. However, in today’s environment, the advent of UAV, satellite reconnaissance, precision weapons and guidance systems, advanced munitions such as fuel air explosives (FAEs), night attack capabilities and so on would definitely add lethal punch to such small wars in the future. A major requirement is that of continuous surveillance over the area of operations. In such conflicts, a dedicated UAV could cover the required area in repeated cycles giving an updated picture. Night reconnaissance and targeting capability would have restricted the LTTE’s freedom of movement around the clock, thus completely paralysing them. Known hideouts in thick jungles could have been effectively destroyed with FAEs. Inaccessible targets could have been attacked with precision weapons on confirmed intelligence.

Notwithstanding the advantages that modern technology could have provided during IPKF operations, the ever present limitations of political will would have remained a major factor in air power employment. Further, the kind of terrain, targets and the environment prevalent during the IPKF operations illustrate the challenges of small wars. No amount of modernity would suffice to target an enemy that is deeply entrenched within a sympathetic civilian population. The rules of engagement will always seek to limit damage to civilians and property, which are the inherent by-products of use of air power in such environment.

The Nineties and Beyond

The departure of the IPKF from Sri Lanka saw an emboldened LTTE spreading its influence southwards. In January 1991 the LTTE launched a simultaneous attack against all SLA bases in Northern Sri Lanka and captured Elephant Pass, cutting off Palay from the rest of Sri Lanka. The SLAF with its outdated inventory of MiG-17s, MiG-15s, FT-7s from China and SF-260s Bell-212/206
and Kamov-26 helicopters could hardly influence the course of the land battle against the LTTE. Operation Thunderbolt launched by the SLAF in Jan 1991 failed to cause any significant impact on the LTTE. In 1993 the depleted SLAF acquired four Pucara Counter Insurgency air craft from Argentina along with Mi-17s from Ukraine. This marked the beginning of an attempt by Sir Landa to strengthen its airforce and play a more active role in the war against the LTTE. The spring of 1995 saw the introduction of SA-7 shoulder fired missiles into the conflict with the LTTE shooting down two Avro HS-748 ac on the same day at Palay airfield. It is believed that these missiles were supplied to the LTTE by a Pakistani terrorist organisation run by the ISI called Harkat-Ul-Ansar. This escalation forced the Sri Lankan government to deploy emergency measures and acquire Mi – 24 attack helicopters from Ukraine. They also acquired their first lot of IAI KFir-C2 fighters from Israel. Fierce fighting during 1995 saw the Sri Lankan Armed Forces making little headway despite large brigade size attacks in the Killinochi, Vavuniya and Mullaitavu sectors supported by artillery and attack helicopters. Pucaras and SI-260’s launched hundreds of rockets in CAS missions to save SLA troops from being overrun by the LTTE. After fierce fighting through the autumn, the SLA launched Op Riviresa to capture Jaffna and establishing a safe corridor South of Jaffna. By Dec Mi-24s were introduced into the fight and the LTTE struck by downing a Y-8 tpt ac and an AN-32 with 63 troops on board. Despite having lost two Avros earlier in the year, the SLAF were not able to sanitise their airfields or equip their ac with appropriate counter measures like IR flares. As a result, 4 tpt ac with crew and 132 soldiers were lost with no comparable attrition caused to the LTTE. The rest of the nineties saw the SLAF being blooded into an operationally effective force with induction of more Mi-24s and Kfir jets. Typical missions flown during the period 1996-2000 included strikes against LTTE bases and supply nodes. Close Air Support training improved significantly with pilots and

75 Tom Cooper, ‘Sri Lanka since 1971, Rearming the SLAF’, P6, ww.acig.org, accessed on 29 Oct 07
technicians being sent overseas for training. Local production of bombs and rockets also commenced. The induction of Super Scout reconnaissance drones in 1998 provided a significant improvement in recce capabilities that could be used for targeting.

From 1997-2000 fierce fighting for control of Jaffna saw the SLAF support the army’s drive up north with Mi-24s and Kfir jets. These were supplemented by newly acquired MiG-27’s from Ukraine and other ac, and by the summer of 2001 the SLAF Orbat comprised the following squadrons. Most of the air bases are indicated on the map on the following page(Fig 5.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Flying Training Wing</td>
<td>Anuradhapura AB</td>
<td>PT-6/6 Cessna, SF.206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Heavy Tpt Sqn</td>
<td>Ratmalana AB</td>
<td>An-32, C-130, HS748, Cessna 421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 VIP Heptr Sqn</td>
<td>Katunayake AB</td>
<td>Bell 206 &amp; 214</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Jet Sqn</td>
<td>Katunayake AB</td>
<td>F-7 BS, FT-7, Mig27/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Heptr Sqn</td>
<td>Vavuniya</td>
<td>Mi-17/Mi-17 I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Heptr Sqn</td>
<td>Minneriya AB</td>
<td>Bell 206/212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Light Tpt Sqn</td>
<td>Ratmalana AB</td>
<td>Beech 200, Y-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Attack Heptr Sqn</td>
<td>Minneriya/Hingarukoda</td>
<td>Mi-24/35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Fighter Sqn</td>
<td>Katunayake AB</td>
<td>Kfir-TC.2, Kfir C.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 UAV Flt</td>
<td>Vavuniya AB</td>
<td>Scout UAVs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sqn</td>
<td>Katunayake AB</td>
<td>K-8</td>
</tr>
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</table>

76 Ibid, p11
Escalation of the Air War

After a hastily brokered peace agreement/ceasefire in 2000 broke down, the SLA and SLAF were in action again, this time with better equipment and tactics. Night Vision devices were said to have been used effectively by both attack helicopters and fighter ac to attack LTTE buses by night carrying leadership. This marked a critical point in the air war with targeting of LTTE leadership based on actionable intelligence. Though the offensive against

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Jaffna ended in failure, MiG-27s continued to strafe LTTE positions with some success. In response to a punitive strike by MiG-27s and Kfir jets against a reported LTTE build up in Wanni and concerned with the growing effectiveness of the SLAF and their depleting air defence capability, the LTTE showed tremendous tactical brilliance by deciding to try and neutralise the SLAF on the ground. In pursuance of this strategy, on 24 Jul 2001 they launched a daring commando raid on Katunayake airfield near Colombo. Despite having over 90 sentry points and 500 men guarding it, LTTE commandoes managed to breach all layers of defence and inflict significant damage to aircraft of various types. Though all members of the LTTE squad were killed, they managed to destroy three Kfir C-2 fighters, two K-8 jet trainers, one MiG-27M, one Mi-24V, two Mi-17s and one Bell-412. Additionally, they also destroyed two Sri Lanka airline commercial jets and damaged several other Airbus aircraft belonging to the national carrier. The sheer magnitude of the strike surprised Colombo and forced them to negotiate a cease fire in Nov 2002 that was brokered by the Norwegians.

Notwithstanding the ceasefire, the fragile peace started showed signs of cracking in Dec 2005 with both sides having built up significant military capability during the three years of the ceasefire. Increasing international pressure on the LTTE after it was declared a terrorist organisation, made it difficult for the LTTE to upgrade its inventory of weapons as it was able to do during the eighties and nineties. The only value addition that manifested itself was the unleashing of the Tamil Elam Air Force (TAF) with a few slow moving Zlin-143 light aircraft of Czech origin and the creation of a few airstrips for operations. On the other hand the Sri Lankan Armed forces embarked on a modernisation spree that saw it better prepared to take on the LTTE this time around. The acquisition of Searcher class of UAVs to complement the existing Scout UAVs meant that the Sri Lankan Armed Forces could hope for better real

79 Ibid,p63
time intelligence that could aid targeting from the air. Elam War-4, as the undeclared war was called by the LTTE, proved to be extremely critical as it saw a comprehensive defeat of the LTTE by a resurgent Sri Lanka armed forces backed by effective utilisation of air power that targeted the LTTE’s Centres of Gravity.

AIR WAR – ELAM 4

The Elam-4 war assumed significance for a number of reasons. Firstly, Karuna’s breakaway LTTE group\(^80\) in the east gave away the first signs of fissure in the LTTE and provided the Sri Lankan, security forces with a distant window of opportunity to exploit, especially from an intelligence point of view. It also exposed chunks in the LTTE leadership and for the first time Prabhakaran appeared vulnerable, particularly so after the death of Anton Balasingam, the suave political face of the LTTE. Secondly, the Sri Lankan security forces changed their targeting model with respect to the LTTE. They realised that Prabhakaran and the top LTTE leadership presented the most valuable targets. This is where airpower was used extremely effectively over the last two years by the SLAF with tangible pay-offs. As a corollary to the previous point, the SLAF also targeted critical military capabilities of the LTTE that related to its ability to wage a prolonged war. Interdiction of Sea Tiger camps and LTTE’s naval capability revealed a concerted attempt to choke the LTTE by interdicting supply routes. SLAF aircraft even engaged LTTE boats within an hour of being alerted. The third interesting feature of Elam War-4 is the psychological impact of the use of air power by a non-state actor. The daring Tamil Eelam Air Force (TAF) strikes by the LTTEs air arm against Katunayake air base on the outskirts of Colombo on 26 Mar 2007 and the combined strike

\(^80\) Karuna was one of Prabhakaran’s key military aides and controlled LTTE cadres in the Eastern provinces. He is supposed to have fallen out with Prabhakaran on the manner in which the struggle for Eelam was being orchestrated.
by commandoes and aircraft of the TAF against Anuradhapura air base indicated the growing importance given by both sides to the use of air power in an unconventional conflict. The other interested doctrinal issue that has emerged from Eelam War-4 is the issue of the contribution of airpower in conflict escalation, and its immediate potential for rapid de-escalation and conflict resolution, if used judiciously.

Air Power with non State Actors

Till very recently, air power assets with non-state actors mainly comprised a variety of ground based air defence weapons like Anti Aircraft guns and Man Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) of the Stinger and SAM-7 class. Taking a leaf out of the Al-Qaeda attacks on the twin towers, the LTTE made remarkable progress in its attempts to put together an air wing of its own. Apart from training aircrew in Europe, it acquired a few light aircraft with limited armament carrying capability, supposedly of Czech origin, and built a few airstrips in Northern Sri Lanka in the area NW of Mullaitivu. More than any long term impact, the Tamil Elam Air Force (TAF) was meant to be used as a psychological weapon against Colombo. In what was supposed to have been a coordinated commando/air strike on Katunayake air base on the night of 26 Mar 2007, two unidentified TAF aircraft bombed a brightly lit hangar facility of the SLAF, inflicting significant but unconfirmed damage to equipment and ac. What was surprising in this stealthy attack was the inability of air defence sensors or weapons to intercept the ac. Why the LTTE commando raid did not materialise is not known. It is also believed that locally manufactured and fused 250 kg bombs were flitted on crude bomb racks and dropped with the help of GPS assistance for reasonable accuracy. In a second coordinated strike on 22 Oct 2007, a suicide commando group of the Black Tigers in conjunction with

81 B Raman, LTTE’s Anuradhapura Raid, Indian Defence Review, Oct-Dec 07,p107
two aircraft of the TAF carried out a precision attack on the Anuradhapura air base destroying a large no of ac that are said to have included three helicopters (Mi-24/17) two fixed wing aircraft, three drones/UAVs and an expensive Beechcraft surveillance plane. The raid was executed with daring, unbelievable courage and precision, sending shocks through the world community on the appearance of such tactics of desperation amongst non-state actors. The attack was planned well with the commandoes neutralizing a radar and an anti-craft position before calling in the air strike. The series of air attacks by the TAF galvanised the SLAF into action and what followed were a series of strikes by Mi-24s.Kfirs and MiG-27s against the Sea Tigers, LTTE camps, the LTTE airstrip complex at Irramadu, and most importantly LTTE leadership, more of which would be discussed in the following section.

Targeting LTTE Leadership

The persistent efforts at targeting Al-Quaeda leadership by the coalition forces led by the US over the last six years led the SLAF to explore possibilities of doing the same with LTTE leadership. While the AL-Quaeda leadership is highly mobile and has safe havens in multiple countries, the LTTE leadership was confined to the Jaffna peninsula and Northern Sri Lanka. Additionally, Prabhakaran was known to prefer bunker based refuges and is said to have moved around with a fairly large entourage, making him relatively vulnerable to air strikes, something that the SLAF has taken advantage. The air strike by SLAF jets at Thiruvairu, a suburb of Killinochi on 02 Nov 07 saw the elimination of the LTTE political commissar, SP ThamilSelvan. Considering that Killinochi is considered the capital of the LTTEs controlled Northern province of Wanni, the SLAF has exploited the coercive and deterrent

82 Ibid,p109
capability of air power without any ground action. This scenario was re-created on Nov 26 & 28 when the SLAF hit two ‘high value’ targets in Jeyanthi Nagar in Killonchi. The targets comprised bunkers in which the LTTE supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran was said to have been injured by falling debris. The intensity of bombing even caused the LTTE to cordon off the area and close the approach road to Jeyanthi Nagar. The extent of injury to Prabhakaran is not as important as the fact that Prabhakaran was made to look extremely vulnerable in his limited area of operation. Three important factors need to be highlighted in this air campaign by the SLAF. These are:-

- Accurate and actionable HUMINT is indispensable and critical for targeting elusive terrorist. The in-fighting within the LTTE leadership, growing disillusionment amongst the local Tamil populace with Prabhakaran and his ruthless recruitment drive, and the successful infiltration of Tamil strongholds by Sri Lanka’s intelligence agencies are factors that improved intelligence for targeting.

- Weapon effectiveness and delivery techniques by Kfir C2 and MiG-27s have improved significantly. There is even an unsubstantiated possibility that the SLAF acquired limited precision capability in the form of strap on Laser guidance kits coupled with appropriate airborne/ground based laser designation capability by special forces who could have infiltrated into the vicinity of the target area.

- There was also a distinct synergy in operations between the three services. A typical example is the fighter strike on a key Sea Tiger facility at Mullaitivu on 29 Sept 07. This attack was preceded by a Naval Operation in which 3 LTTE boats were sunk off the Trincomalee coast while they were attempting to evacuate LTTE cadres who were trapped

and encircled by the Sri Lankan Army. Relentless pressure is something that was applied by all forms of combat power on a weakened enemy. On Jan 06, the head of the LTTE’s military intelligence ‘Col Charles’ or Shanmuganathai Ravishankar was killed in a claymore attack on their van by the Sri Lanka Army’s Deep Penetration unit in Pallamadu in Manaar. Thus, in a span of 2 months, two key aides of Prabhakaran were killed and Prabhakaran himself was injured in clinical attacks by Sri Lankan security forces.

- Political will to use airpower extensively has resulted in significant gains for the Sri Lankan government. The bottom line was that the LTTE was on the back foot during Elam-4 despite its daring air raids. It was airpower that played a critical role in this reversal.

KEY TAKE AWAYS

As the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka wound down after reaching new levels of sophistication, the official abrogation of the 4 year ceasefire by the Sri Lankan govt in early Jan 08 culminated in a comprehensive military victory for the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. History tells us that most of the times when air power has been used intelligently in an ‘unconventional war’ between a state and an ‘unconventional enemy’, the conflict has escalated only to de-escalate equally quickly. Linebacker II in Vietnam allowed the US to effect a calibrated withdrawal from Vietnam. Air Power broke Milosevic’s will in Kosovo, as did the use of air power hasten the defeat of well entrenched intruders in Kargil.

However, the success achieved by the SLAF in targeting LTTE leadership was astounding to say the least. Integration of coordinated intelligence, extremely short sensor to shooter time cycles and accurate weapon delivery has seen the use of offensive air power in urban and jungle terrain reap rich dividends notwithstanding the collateral damage. Despite the severe depletion
of critical SLAF assets after the twin LTTE strikes on Katunayake and Anuradhapura airfields, the author opines that the ‘boxing in’ of the LTTE leadership in a small area was primarily due to the coercive effect of airpower that made it impossible for Prabhakaran to move around as freely as he could in earlier times. The writing was always on the wall because the LTTE leadership was restricted to small areas of Wanni, Mulaitivu and Jaffna making them fairly easy targets for airstrikes, especially with increased availability of accurate HUMINT and assistance from the Sri Lankan Army’s Deep Penetration Commando units. Some lessons to draw from the last six months of fighting in Sri Lanka are:-

- Notwithstanding the daring attacks by the TAF on Katunayake and Anuradhapura, the overall impact of the offensive use of air power by a non-state actor has been detrimental to its overall objective.
- It instead acted as a catalyst for galvanizing the Sri Lankan govt and security forces into offering a fitting riposte.
- Considering the failure of the US to eliminate Bin Laden and Zawahiri, the success of the SLAF in targeting LTTE leadership contributed significantly to the final outcome of the conflict. The importance of leadership as a critical Centre of Gravity of a non-state actor has been amply validated in Sri Lanka and needs to be taken cognisance of by India, especially in its fight to contain the spread of terror networks and Naxalism. Whether the Indian Govt can ever take a call on using air power offensively against insurgent leadership within its own geographical boundaries is purely a function of domestic political compulsions and national will when it comes to combating terrorism and other forms of ‘unconventional warfare’. It is also extremely critical for the Sri Lankan government not to get carried away by the effectiveness of air power and use it only as an effective tool for conflict termination. The key to this maturity would lie in a realisation that the ethnic conflict can
only be resolved through negotiations and not through indiscriminate use of military force.

Epilogue

This research on the Sri Lankan conflict commenced when the Elam IV conflict erupted in 2006. As early as Feb 2007, this researcher predicted the defeat of the LTTE and even guessed a time frame of end 2008/beginning 2009 for the same. These views differed from those of many Indian strategic analysts who predicted a resurgence of the LTTE. Deep analysis that again would be hotly debated reveals that the defeat of the LTTE commenced from the time the Sri Lankan government took the decision to use air power offensively against the LTTE Centres of Gravity, which mainly comprised their leadership and Sea Tiger assets. What was also commendable was the synergy with which the Sri Lankan army worked in tandem with the SLAF towards the articulated policy of 'terrorizing the terrorist'