

# Issue Brief

August 2023  
No : 384

Revisiting IPKF to  
draw lessons for  
India's future  
Out of Area  
Contingency  
Operations

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# Revisiting IPKF to draw lessons for India's future Out-of-Area Contingency Operations

## Abstract

*Deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987-1990, despite being the bloodiest Out-of-Area Contingency Operations (OOAC) in the history of the Indian Armed Forces, remains till date largely unrecognised and barely commemorated. This article revisits Operation Pawan, and examines the factors which drew the IPKF into a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. The vulnerability of the IPKF to misplaced assumptions and mission creep, gaps in intelligence, lack of jointness, and its subdued withdrawal without fulfilling its mandate, hold out rich lessons while undertaking prospective OOACs. Diffused command and control, loss of trust and disinclination to adapt in unfamiliar operating environments are likely to jeopardise such missions. This article amply demonstrates that overseas military deployment to resolve conflicts in foreign countries invariably transforms into a politico-military endeavour. At every stage, the intervening nation must reaffirm the sincerity and reassess the strength of the commitments promised by the host nation requesting military intervention. Perception battles also need to be won at home and internationally. This paper provides specific suggestions for India's policy makers, strategic and military planners in executing future OOACs to deliver humanitarian and other assistance to friendly nations on request, success of which, in today's context, would be determined by harnessing technology, incorporating non-standard solutions, and imbibing a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach.*

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, military operations undertaken for defending India's sovereignty on Indian soil have rarely been criticised by the national mainstream media, the intelligentsia, and the Opposition parties. However, in case of Out-of-Area Contingency Operations (OOAC), India's national interests must be established concurrently within the bounds of the host nation's short-term consent for military intervention and long-term sovereign aspirations for peaceful development. The degree and costs of military involvement in alien territories, nature and duration of intervention, option of multi-lateral coordination, dilution of the chain of command to non-military civilian administrators and diplomats, handling of casualties and injuries among Indian soldiers, etc. all get debated through cost-benefit lens by different agencies and think-tanks within India, the host nation, and of course, internationally. In the present era of democratisation and multiplicity of opinions fuelled by the ubiquitous influence of high-speed internet and social media platforms, intense scrutiny and speculation from our citizens have become a reality. The visual media, the presence of journalists and human rights

activists in the conflict zone, make military operations more transparent. Therefore, political pressures and myriad suggestions from authoritative non-military sources could result in outright abandonment of the OOAC mission.

Military actions alone cannot produce permanent solutions in conflict zones, especially in places like the North-East Sri Lanka, where the affected populations were highly literate, and the extremists were distinctly motivated. Allowing the warring parties to negotiate politics is one plausible path to lasting peace. However, one must remember that non-state actors would invariably seek to improve the military balance and bargaining power in their favour by resorting to unconventional tactics. These could range from creating incidents of violence along the periphery of any liberated or ceasefire zone, issuing threats of reprisal to local influential leaders, targeting other relatively moderate groups, spreading disinformation about military atrocities, blocking supply routes, organising youth-led protests, running online global psychological operations, etc.

### **Genesis and Evolution of The IPKF Conundrum**

The Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was sent to Sri Lanka on 30 July 1987 to fulfil the commitment of the Government of India under Clause 2.16<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord, signed only the previous day (29 July 1987). Codenamed “Operation Pawan”, it remains, to this day, the most controversial OOAC of India. Since the official records of the campaign from July 1987 to March 1990 are yet to be declassified<sup>2</sup>, one can analyse the IPKF experience only through the anecdotal accounts and the published works of erstwhile serving military officers, diplomats, foreign policy experts, newspaper reports, editorials and opinion pieces. Although the IPKF has become inextricably linked to the dominant militant group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which it fought fiercely, it should be recalled that the IPKF was “invited in” by the Sri Lankan President JR Jayewardene to disarm “all Tamil militants” by 03 August 1987, as per the Accord, and to maintain public order in Tamil dominated areas.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clause 2.16 of the Accord mentioned that ‘in the event that the Government of Sri Lanka requests the Government of India to afford military assistance to implement these proposals, the Government of India will cooperate by giving military assistance as and when required.’

### **Overconfidence and Misplaced Assumptions**

It appears that India's 1971 military success in liberating Bangladesh, by defeating the full-fledged nation-state Pakistan, had given rise to overt optimism about projecting its military power to prevail over a few scattered Tamil militant groups in a limited territory of North-East Sri Lanka. Past participation of Indian soldiers in United Nations Peacekeeping missions in Korea, Indo-China, the Gaza and Congo had bred complacency about its unilateral peacekeeping abilities. Since President Jayewardene wanted to mobilise the Sri Lankan Army from Jaffna and Trincomalee to control communal riots in the capital Colombo and southern Sri Lanka, his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, readily obliged to the request to send Indian troops. In the erstwhile Cold War era, this OOAC mission was expected to deter any US-Israel-Pakistan influence in Sri Lankan politics.

Although discussions about possible military operations in Sri Lanka had started about a month prior to the signing of the Accord, the IPKF commander Major General Harkirat Singh and his troops were given only a notice of 6-8 hours before take-off. Neither an intelligence summary nor a proper operational brief was made available to the commander. An infantry division was deployed with only a dozen tourist maps purchased in Hyderabad. Copies for distribution to the platoon and section commanders were made only upon reaching Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> Contingency planning was not done on the optimistic assumption that the LTTE would be controlled within a fortnight; that "the boys" of LTTE, who had been trained by India's external intelligence agency, the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW) at selected regimental centres of the Indian Army<sup>5</sup>, would not challenge an India-led Accord, let alone fight the elite Indian soldiers. The initial IPKF battalions were equipped only with 7.62 mm SLR, which were far inferior compared to the AK47, M16 and G-3 weapons of the LTTE.<sup>6</sup> Both the military and the intelligence chiefs misread the LTTE's intentions, and grossly underestimated its capabilities in organising violence. The perverse effect of a deeply embedded cognitive



predisposition among senior military ranks, that Tamils do not belong to the traditional “martial races”, was the expectation that the OOAC mission would be over within days.

It is also important to acknowledge the ethno-cultural factors that discredited the IPKF in Sri Lanka from being branded as ‘welcome saviours’ to being castigated as an ‘occupation force’.

### **Losing the Sinhalese Trust**

The presence of Tamil soldiers, initially, in the IPKF adversely affected collaboration with the local police which was predominantly Sinhalese. When the IPKF launched its Jaffna offensive on 11 October, the Tamil soldiers were given non-combatant roles of interpreters; however the soldiers were unprepared for the task.

Although the IPKF Commander had been able to persuade the LTTE supremo Prabhakaran to surrender weapons between 05 and 21 August 1987, these efforts were rendered ineffective as the R&AW allegedly did not stop supplying arms to the rebels.<sup>7</sup> During the surrender, the IPKF also did not intervene to stop the LTTE from attacking the rival Tamil groups, possibly expecting that it would be convenient to negotiate with a single political voice of militant Tamils. Diplomatic authorities also restrained the IPKF, hoping that the local Tamil population would fully disown the violent LTTE.<sup>8</sup> Selective actions severely devalued the IPKF’s claim of being an unbiased peacekeeper.

### **Losing the Tamil Trust**

On 15 September 1987, the LTTE leader Thileepan began a fast unto death with massive support, having raised five points of demand before the Indian government. One of his demands was that “the Sri Lankan army and Police should withdraw from schools in Tamil villages and the weapons given by the Sri Lankan government to ‘homeguards’ should be withdrawn under the supervision of the Indian army”.<sup>9</sup> The IPKF could have supervised such

disarmament under its peacekeeping mandate, but by its inaction, it missed a confidence-building opportunity. Unfortunately, Thileepan's death on 26 September was interpreted as a sign by both Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils that democratic, non-violent forms of protest would be ineffective, and this turned the sentiment in favour of direct confrontation.

The inflection point in the IPKF-LTTE hostilities came with the "boat tragedy" of 05 October 1987, when 15 out of 17 captured LTTE cadres committed mass suicide after the IPKF, despite being the region's dominant force, refused to take them into custody as prisoners of war, and agreed to the Lankan government's demand for passage to Colombo. With LTTE seeking revenge, soon after on 08 October, the IPKF recorded its first casualties when five paracommandos were ambushed while going to collect provisions, and burnt in public view with tyres thrown around their necks.<sup>10</sup> This triggered the IPKF's full-on battle with the LTTE from 11 October. During Operation Pawan, on 21 October, 68-70 patients and staff of Jaffna Hospital were killed in the IPKF crossfire, which both the Lankan government and the LTTE denounced as a "massacre".<sup>11</sup>

The LTTE was notorious for its use of civilian non-combatants, who were tasked with retrieving bodies, weapons and ammunitions of slain LTTE cadres and the IPKF soldiers. They would wrap the dead LTTE combatants in civilian dress to fuel propaganda that the IPKF was violating the law of war by indiscriminately targeting civilians. When the IPKF placed checkpoints at all entry and exit routes in Jaffna town, rumours started circulating that the Indian soldiers were conducting humiliating, intrusive searches of Tamil women and children. Actions such as imposition of curfews and movement restrictions, cordon and search operations seeking hidden arms, control over local hospitals to deny treatment to wounded rebel cadres, etc. generated resentment.

### **Gaps in Intelligence**

The IPKF mission was plagued with a persistent lack of intelligence. Although the R&AW placed intelligence sources in Sri Lanka, these assets rarely stepped out of their homes for fear of being targeted. The R&AW neither provided any dossiers on LTTE leaders' profiles, their military strength, tactics and strongholds, nor advised the IPKF Commander on the cultural and ideological motivations of any of the Accord stakeholders. Contrarily, it was alleged that the R&AW played a cynical double game by helping the LTTE acquire arms and equipment through the sea route, while the IPKF was fighting the rebels.<sup>12</sup>

The Intelligence Bureau (IB) refused to share information on political developments in India and Sri Lanka.<sup>13</sup> This, we now know, had a significant bearing on the legitimacy and support for the Indian military on foreign soil, especially once the governments changed in both the countries in 1989.

The state intelligence Q Branch of Tamil Nadu Police denied access to any information on LTTE networks in Tamil Nadu.<sup>14</sup> This deprived the IPKF of any leverage that could have been used to negotiate terms of surrender more aggressively with the LTTE leadership in the initial months. There was no source within the LTTE cadres who was able to provide inputs on its innovative guerrilla tactics, and its propensity to use women and children to track Indian troop movements.

### **Disinclination to Adapt**

The Indian Army was led by the Chief of Army Staff General Sundarji who had, in March 1987, spearheaded the conclusion of a large combined arms military exercise codenamed "Operation Brasstacks". The apex military leadership favoured the Pattonesque style of conventional, heavy artillery warfare, amply demonstrated when about 80,000 troops were tasked to launch Operation Pawan. Despite having experience of counterinsurgency

operations in North-East India, the IPKF did not adopt a leaner profile in response to the LTTE's unconventional style of low intensity asymmetric conflict, showcased by its sniper attacks, use of civilian combatants, improvised explosive devices and anti-personnel mines. Commanders of companies and battalions led operations from the front with visible rank pips, making them easy targets of LTTE snipers.<sup>15</sup> No threat analysis was done on the LTTE's first-ever suicide bombing carried out on 05 July 1987, in which 40 Lankan troops of the Nelliady army camp had been killed.<sup>16</sup> Cordon and search operations in liberated Jaffna were carried out in large formations of brigades, allowing rebels to easily anticipate movements of, and evade the search teams. The IPKF communications were also being intercepted regularly.<sup>17</sup>

### **Lack of Jointness**

The IPKF campaign was singular in its lack of inter-services coordination. The Indian Army comprising a force of five divisions (15 brigades and 3 Para Commando battalions), ad-hoc complements of Indian Air Force and Indian Navy, one Assam Rifles battalion, two CRPF battalions, one CRPF Mahila (woman) company and one Territorial Army battalion were inducted under the Overall Force Commander of IPKF, Lt General AS Kalkat, independently without forming a proper overseas joint command.<sup>18</sup> There was a lot of fluidity, affiliations and re-affiliations of brigades and battalions.<sup>19</sup> The Overall Force Commander did not have experienced senior Air Force and Naval officers to consult in the IPKF HQ, and hence had to separately requisition support from the Southern Commands of the two sister forces.<sup>20</sup> In strategic discussions with the Indian PM, the COAS did not involve his fellow chiefs.<sup>21</sup> No joint task force was created. Air operations during Operation Pawan were not properly coordinated for target identification and acquisition.

Synergy improved during the tenure of General VN Sharma. This was visible during the withdrawal process, when INS Viraat aircraft carrier was deployed off the Kerala



coast from mid-July 1989 in anticipation.<sup>22</sup> The newly formed Indian Marine Special Forces launched its maiden naval operation to blow up Jaffna jetty, in order to neutralise the LTTE's suicide boats that were threatening the IPKF's naval supply ships.<sup>23</sup> Such special operations were kept secret from the IPKF Commander, as it involved incursions into Lankan territorial waters, and could have been viewed as breaking Sri Lanka's nominal command over the IPKF.

### **Underrated Achievements and a Subdued Withdrawal**

The IPKF managed to create stable conditions in North-Eastern provinces in which elections were held in October-November 1988, wherein which a Tamil party won, despite boycott by the LTTE. The IPKF was compelled to perform administrative and police functions until a regular local police force was raised. In a bid to destabilise the democratically elected provincial government, the Lankan government started supplying arms to the LTTE. The IPKF Commander, despite highlighting this unethical development at the highest levels of Indian and Sri Lankan political circles, could not prevent this.<sup>24</sup> Military action against even a fringe element in the Lankan government could easily have escalated into a full-blown war with serious international ramifications. Once the VP Singh government (1989) came to power in India with an election promise to recall the IPKF, Sri Lankan President Premadasa pushed aggressively for withdrawal of the IPKF highlighting that, since the Colombo-LTTE talks had started, therefore, no third-party intervention was required.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE OOAC**

- At the start of the OOAC mission, the apex military leaders of India and the host nation should issue a joint public statement outlining the broad rules of engagement and cooperation. A well-defined operational mandate, preferably containing specific timelines including a sunset clause, geographical limitations and an escalation matrix to resolve inter-agency disputes, could shape the expectations of

the troops from their commanders. The operational mandate should be consistent with the host nation's counterinsurgency strategy – to promote interoperability in joint actions. Wherever the host nation's military is not fully functional or has been defeated, its highest elected leader should be asked to address its citizens, along with the OOAC commander, so that legitimacy for deployment of Indian troops is publicly established.

- At any stage during the OOAC mission, if political leadership of either nation changes, it should be ensured that sovereign support for continuing the mission gets reaffirmed forthwith by the new leader. To avoid mission creep and to enhance accountability, a Standing Parliamentary Committee should be constituted to conduct reviews, at least once every 3 months, on the achievements of the force against the pre-defined milestones, and on the changes in the nature and scope of the conflict. The rationale for enduring military operations abroad, especially if the scope of OOAC needs to be expanded to cover new extremist groups and regions, should be debated in the Parliament.
- The OOAC Command HQ should demand authorisation for deployment under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, which would allow troops to adequately respond to all acts of aggression and compel the adversaries towards a viable settlement. This would also ensure that the OOAC mission has the consent of the UN Security Council.
- The Command HQ should demand from the host nation's intelligence organisation comprehensive information about the composition, capabilities, affiliations, motives, intents and modus operandi of the militant groups, as well as details of the population and terrain of the target combat zone. Such information should be used to estimate the optimal size of force to be deployed, the weapons and

communication equipment required, and the tactics to be used. The force-to-population ratio should be varied depending on the escalation or cessation of violence, but should be limited to a pre-defined threshold beyond which bilateral military assistance should be replaced by multi-lateral intervention.

- The OOAC troops should be sensitised and trained to perform traditional policing functions, in case the local police is unavailable in a newly liberated zone. The modern policing approach, having roots in community engagement, requires the military troops to keep a flexible mindset regarding duties and responsibilities, to adapt to the use of minimum, non-lethal force for maintenance of law & order, and to render assistance in relief and rehabilitation of the displaced communities and refugees. If the OOAC mission commences prior to an armed combat phase, then the Command HQ should persuade the Indian government or the United Nations to keep a stand-by team of officials ready to function as an interim civilian administration until more permanent local governance structures and authorities are put in place by the host nation through its Constitutional process.
- Civilian protection measures should be integrated into the operational plans, ensuring that the troops are properly trained and briefed before undertaking any offensive or defensive actions. This would mitigate civilian casualties, earn population support for further military action, satisfy international human rights monitors, and support stabilisation efforts by the host nation state and donor agencies. The prevailing operating environment would determine the degree of trade-off between ensuring civilian security and the military prerogative to selectively neutralise conflict-sustaining civilian sources, which include suicide bombers, cash couriers, vehicles or vessels used for shipping arms, etc.

- In an era of unregulated social media, the horrific visuals of captive Indian soldiers being tortured or executed, coupled with the Commander's inability to launch a timely and effective recovery, would trigger public backlash about India's military capabilities, and could prompt a strategic changing of the OOAC mission, even to the extent of suspension of operations. The Command HQ should focus on developing capabilities, resources and preparedness to conduct personnel recovery operations at short notice, both unilaterally and jointly with the forces of allies. This could include implanting trackers with personnel to facilitate location, devising emergency communication and surveillance protocols (including drone support), training in infiltration and exfiltration, modules on escape and survival, use of specialised weapons and equipment, Standard Operating Procedures for medical support, counselling, debriefing and reintegration of the recovered personnel. To overcome the ad-hoc nature associated with such secondary tasking, a Special Forces Command should be made an integral component of the OOAC mission, with responsibilities and orientation to act as a primary responder.
- The Command HQ should have a dedicated media engagement team. The political overground wing of rebel groups and self-proclaimed human rights activists often seek to attribute all death and destruction within the conflict zone solely on military actions. Attempts to delegitimise ongoing operations through speculative journalism should be countered through meticulous fact-checking and timely issuance of clarifications. In the case of IPKF, the domestic media reported favourably during the initial 2-3 months. However, public opinion turned negative when limited success was achieved despite large-scale casualties. The media policy of any OOAC mission should strive for a simplified procedure, with authority

delegated at the Command HQ level or even lower, when it comes to publicising the success stories and the positive images of soldiers.

- Technology should be harnessed to counter propaganda, mobilisation, and obfuscation. For instance, there exist open source tools that can conduct reverse image searches to debunk circulating fake images alleging atrocities, monitor geofenced social media content in real-time during operations in that area, perform network and affinity analysis on vocal online critics to probe for underlying association with enemy groups, locate invite links for closed WhatsApp groups or Telegram channels being used for radicalisation, recruitment and fundraising and infiltrate them using aliases. These activities cannot be left solely to India-based intelligence wings, but should be done by the local Command HQ. Therefore, it is important to select a Commander who holds a positive attitude towards technology, is willing to use it as a powerful weapon in his unit's arsenal, and is comfortable encouraging talented unit personnel to use computers and the Internet more than guns.
- A component of the on-ground soldiers should be encouraged to develop capabilities for gathering Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) and Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT), which could help to predict and pre-empt actions of key influencers within the host government, the adversaries, the local media and the human rights activists. Neither the Directorate of Military Intelligence and the Defence Intelligence Agency could be expected to rapidly deploy intelligence assets in a foreign jurisdiction, nor the host nation's intelligence agencies would be inclined to share high-quality, real-time inputs for military use. Therefore, OSINT can help in profiling targets, providing adequate context and leverage during any peace talks, gauging the local sentiments



on the presence of an alien armed force, and identifying potential pockets of co-operation or resistance during planned operations. Alerts should be created on social media platforms with carefully selected keyword combinations (for example, #IPKFgoBack) to obtain instant feedback on a just concluded operation, especially those involving civilian casualties. Monitoring social media can also reveal trending topics of unreported misconduct with members of the public or local law violations, committed by own personnel for immediate redressal and disciplinary action, and for preparing an official response.

- For any OOAC mission, the logistics wing should procure and deploy the latest technologies and equipment. Unmanned Aerial Systems should be used for both defensive and offensive manoeuvres, such as carrying of benign payloads for surveillance/ recce, functioning as kamikaze drones to destroy distant targets, etc. Robots should be utilised as advanced scouts to detect and neutralise IEDs during troop movements.
- In the absence of reliable local guides, the critical task of physical reconnaissance should be attempted with minimal human involvement. The Command HQ should be authorised to directly request the repositioning of any of India's satellites, with capability to offer spatial resolution of 3 metres or better, to cover the entire operational zone.
- The OOAC mission should have a specialised team for conducting post-operation searches to gather electronic equipment, which might contain valuable information about the enemy, as also for subsequent use as evidence in courtroom trials.
- It is imperative to document the socio-cultural aspects of the OOAC Commander's interaction with leaders of the host nation and rebel groups, as well as the quality of engagement of troops with the local communities. This would serve as a valuable

store of local knowledge and experience of customs and traditions, especially for providing continuity between unit rotations and incoming reinforcements. Since such functions require non-hierarchical, unclassified dissemination of information, they go beyond the conventional intelligence tradecraft. Each brigade should have 3/4 civilian experts on sociology or behavioural psychology, who could act as special advisors to the Command HQ. These professionals could help the military personnel adapt quickly to the foreign settings, offer alternative non-military perspectives to enrich the design of counterinsurgency initiatives, especially in anti-radicalisation and pro-surrender efforts, and mediate effectively with the local media, Civil Society Organisations and dislocated communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The use of military force in overseas jurisdiction remains a viable option for protecting India's national interests against global threats, or for power projection in pursuit of a humanitarian imperative. However, the OOAC mission should invariably be accompanied by publicly declared support from both the home and the host nations. To reinforce India's stake in mitigating crisis in foreign lands and to maintain credibility on the international stage, it is essential to win perception battles equally and emphatically as the physical battles. In a volatile and culturally unfamiliar operating environment, the OOAC Commander should encourage intellectual diversity among his troops to obtain non-standard solutions, and should leverage technology as a force multiplier.

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