
The hard-nosed realism of General Sarath Fonseka

Thursday, 03 July 2008

by Dayan Jayatileka Sri Lanka's most successful Army Commander, serving under Sri Lanka's militarily most successful Commander-in Chief and President, and most dedicated Defence Secretary, has held an important discussion with Colombo's foreign correspondents on our most essential topic, the war. That General Fonseka is our most successful army commander may be hotly debated in the subjective and partisan Sri Lankan media, but not by top professionals overseas.

Gen Ashok Mehta, formerly of the Gurkhas, once the youngest general to serve in the Indian army, and IPKF commander Batticaloa-Ampara sector, had this to say in the April 15th 2008 issue of The Tribune (Chandigarh): [Sri Lankan] "Government forces have never before enjoyed military and moral ascendancy over the LTTE as now". Note the word "never". He followed this up even more conclusively in a June 17 article (reproduced online in the Sri Lanka Guardian): "Never before in the ongoing 30-year long war have the Sri Lankan Security Forces been better placed to defeat the LTTE. This has come about by a combination of proactive political, diplomatic and military measures. Two key developments choreographed by the government facilitated a favourable outcome of the military campaign", granting the political leadership – President Rajapakse -- due credit for this achievement unprecedented in three decades. Fonseka is known to be tough, taciturn and idiosyncratic. He has served right through the war, and his best hours, until he took over as Army Commander, were in 2000 and again during the CFA. I was at a seminar with Gen Gerry de Silva, Air Vice Marshal Harry Goonetilleke in New Delhi at which the Elephant Pass debacle and the subsequent LTTE failure in capturing Jaffna were discussed with recently retired top Indian military officials. Then again, Gen Mehta had a two hour discussion with me in his Colombo hotel room, on a study tour to assess how the Sri Lankan armed forces recovered from the Elephant Pass debacle to successfully prevent the takeover of Jaffna. I shared my findings with those distinguished Indian officers on those occasions and found that their investigations and mine converged. While a Sri Lankan army general had lined up CTB buses each with a board identifying the army unit that would be seated in them, and was ready to retreat from Jaffna, coming down to Colombo only to get clearance, he met with a stiff refusal from then president Chandrika Kumaratunga and Deputy Minister of Defence Gen Anuruddha Ratwatte. These two political leaders denied permission to withdraw and instead Gen Ratwatte flew to Jaffna and spent 21 days there, rallying the troops. On the battlefield the turning point came at Kilaly, when a 7,000 strong joint force under General Sarath Fonseka held the line, beating back the Tiger advance. That was the point at which the Tigers were unable to capitalise on their offensive momentum and go on to capture Jaffna. General Fonseka's next best hour came during the CFA when many army officers were bending over backwards to go along with the new line of appeasement, despite the sacrifice of the DMI unit at Millennium City. I remember criticising the lopsided character of the CFA at a seminar at which a distinguished South African judge Albie Sachs was one of the speakers, and a Sri Lankan general who would be on the negotiating team with the Tigers, did not even want to look me in the eye, still less be seen talking to me afterwards. Generals Lionel Balagalle, Sarath Fonseka, Gamini Hettiaarachchi and Sanath Karunaratne were honourable exceptions to the trend of appeasement and currying favour with the political establishment. While other top brass were silent about their own boys, or were compromising the security interests of nation and the armed forces, General Fonseka was proving his mettle by doing otherwise. He countered the Tiger and TNA demand for the dismantling of the High Security Zones in Jaffna with a proposal that it be linked to the verifiable withdrawal of the Tigers heavy guns to a point below Vavuniya. I was a lecturer by invitation at every single Sri Lankan military academy, including when US Special Forces visited from Fort Bragg, and am the proud possessor of several trophies awarded as tokens of gratitude. On these occasions, chatting to officers and even drivers, I was left with no doubt that Sarath Fonseka was one man they would follow through the gates of hell, when— not if, because we had no doubts — the war was reignited by the Tigers. In his latest and most considered conversation with the media, the Army commander has articulated an analysis which seems to me, realistic without being pessimistic. Indeed it is optimistic, determined and clear-sightedly realistic at the same time. It represents a tough-minded realism in the best sense of the word. He says that in his expectation the Tigers will be defeated as a conventional force, as a force capable of fighting a conventional war, within a year from now. This is no small deal, because as the late defence analyst Taraki wrote, the whole matter will be decided by the conventional fighting strength of Tamil Eelam; by the clash between the conventional armies of the two sides. Already, says the Army commander, the LTTE has passed its zenith as a conventional fighting force. Gen Fonseka is realistic enough to admit that the Tigers will be capable of a low-intensity war even from that point on. Furthermore he understands that Tamil nationalism and the Tamil Diaspora are the wellsprings that will sustain such a low-intensity war, for an unforeseeable duration. That's good news. What we cannot afford is to have two armies on Sri Lankan soil. It wouldn't matter if the LTTE were to stand for Tamil Eelam, the PTOMS, the ISGA, federalism or the most innocuous decentralisation. The war is not because of what it stands for but because of its armed character. No state can afford not to monopolise the means of significant armed violence, and therefore the Tigers have to be disarmed as well as rendered bereft of the capacity to re-arm. Though it may not seem so at first sight, Gen Fonseka is also right when he said that the Tigers wish not only to have Tamil Eelam but to dominate the whole island. Those are indeed the stakes not only because the island's long history proves the expansionist dynamic of the project but because similar conflicts the world over reveal a tendency of the winning separatist side to expand its borders, bringing more and more arable land under its control, and gaining defence in depth. The objective today is breaking the Tiger machine as a conventional force, and thereby liberating the rest of Sri Lanka's territory, reunifying it as a country, and one might add, an economy, a market. We can afford a low intensity insurgency for a while. The defeat of such an insurgency will require (a) greater use of small-unit tactics on the part of the Sri Lankan armed forces and (b) active Provincial Councils in the North and East, with a sufficiency of devolved powers and resources, empowering anti-Tiger Tamil leaderships. No

counter-insurgency is possible without a strong local support base, which means devolving police powers. At the moment the Sri Lankan armed forces have done as well as the IPKF at its best, and comparatively better in jungle warfare. This is why a provincial council election was possible after twenty years. As Gen Ashok Mehta confirms "For the LTTE the situation was similar to, but worse than, that during November 1987 after the Tigers were defeated by the IPKF in Jaffna. They pulled out of the Jaffna peninsula and built a new citadel in the Wannai. The difference now is that they have no fallback base in the East and are hemmed in between SLSF in the North and East." (June 17, SLG). I would supplement Gen Mehta's analysis with another factor: the excellent leadership of the Sri Lankan Navy under Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda and the Air Force under Air Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke. The former revolutionised the scope of the Sri Lankan navy, performing blue-water operations to cripple the Tiger re-supply capacity, while the latter has deployed tactical airpower as a force multiplier in a more effective manner than ever before in our long war. It is the combination of the three arms that has made our current successes possible, though greater synchronicity and synergies are necessary to win decisively. General Sarath Fonseka spotted the Achilles Heel of the Tiger: even at its best, the LTTE has never been able to sustain major operations on more than one front simultaneously. Today the Tigers are being hemmed in on multiple fronts. What is perhaps most heartening about Gen Sarath Fonseka's recent remarks is the demonstration of the correct military doctrine as manifested in the grasp of the principal military objective. During Eelam War Two (1990-1995) under President Premadasa, Brigadier Denzil Kobbekaduwa had demonstrated this correct grasp when he said "I'm not interested in taking real estate, I want to take out the Tigers". This was forgotten in the CBK-Daluwatta years that followed, in favour of a policy of territorial expansion, leading to over-extension and vulnerability. The CBK years, the main and important achievements of which were the liberation of Jaffna (1995) and its defence (2000), also saw a self-defeating unilateral peace campaign in the form of Mangala Samaraweera's Sudu Nelum Movement, which eroded recruitment and sabotaged the war efforts of Gen Ratwatte (as he disclosed to me). By contrast Gen Fonseka was able to tell the media that last year there were 32,000 new recruits while the figure for the first half of this year is 16,000. The Tigers are still recruiting, he admitted, but pointed out that the quality of the cadre had dropped drastically. The attrition rate suffered by the Tigers was 400-500 a month. The Sri Lankan Army commander is quoted by The Hindu as saying "We do not just go for terrain, we go for the kill. This is the difference between the military operations in the past and the present". In saying this he is wittingly or unwittingly echoing the wisdom of the greatest general of the post World War II period, the hero of Dien Bien Phu and architect of the defeat of history's mightiest military power the USA, namely Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap, who incisively defined the goal of all military strategy as being "the elimination of the living forces of the enemy". (These are the personal views of the writer.)