



## Defining India's Security Looking Beyond Limited War and Cold Start Strategies

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There is a Biblical quality to the Indian debate—exclusively led by the Indian Army—on 'Limited War' and 'Cold Start'. Death is followed by resurrection, which is followed by another cycle of this sequence of events. Ad infinitum.

After arguing vociferously for years that Limited War and Cold Start provided a viable compellence doctrine to stop Pakistan from undertaking cross border terrorism, the Chief of Army Staff disavowed this doctrine last September. He declared that Cold Start is "neither a doctrine nor a military term in our glossary", but only one among many "contingencies and options". Clearly he was being economical with the truth, perhaps on higher directions from the civilian leadership, currently fixated on re-establishing a political dialogue with Pakistan. And, despite the terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008, which was unequivocally proven to have emanated from Pakistan.

Indeed, the origins of the Limited War thesis can be traced back to the threat from Pakistan and to the formal statement by George Fernandes, then Defense Minister, in January 2000, holding that there was space for a limited conflict between full-scale war and inaction in case of another provocation by Pakistan a la Kargil, despite nuclear deterrence existing between the two countries.

It would be recollected that the reciprocal India-Pakistan nuclear tests had occurred earlier in May 1998. A state of nuclear deterrence was established thereafter between the two countries. But, this had not deterred Pakistan from launching its armed intrusions across the Line of Control in the Kargil sector, which triggered the Kargil conflict

over May-July 1999. It ended in a huge military-diplomatic disaster for Pakistan. Undeterred, it promoted the militant attacks on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, which led to the border confrontation crisis over 2001-02. On at least two occasions, hostilities seemed imminent, but were averted due to American pressure, but also good sense dawning on both sides. The potential of these security situations spinning out of control and breaching the nuclear threshold was, therefore, very real.

But the more important point is that the Indian political and military establishment was stopped from initiating hostilities despite being the aggrieved party. Witness the sequence of events thereafter following the Mumbai attacks in 2008. Great anger and wild talk was heard about India launching military action against Pakistan. But, it was quickly followed by the realization that India really had no military option available due the state of nuclear deterrence obtaining.

The Limited War and Cold War doctrines developed against this general backdrop of the inability of the armed forces on to exploit India's superior conventional forces against Pakistan due to its nuclear deterrent. This was unsurprising, because the fear of a nuclear Armageddon looms large in the minds of strategists if the adversary possesses nuclear weapons. One can recollect what General Sundarji replied when asked by an interviewer what were the lessons to be derived from the first Gulf war. He replied that if a country wants to take on the United States, it should make sure it has nuclear weapons. Witness, the gingerly manner in which North Korea is being treated with the constant threats of military action being hurled against Iran. Nuclear weapons introduce a new

calculus into the military balance between two adversarial powers in that they restore strategic parity between militarily unequal countries.

## I IN SEARCH OF OPTIONS: A CRITIQUE

Naturally, all these questions India's nuclear activism in 1974 when it conducted its so-called 'peaceful nuclear explosion'. Clearly this event was informed by Indira Gandhi's political compulsions to divert attention from the JP movement against growing corruption in the political system. Attention might also be drawn to the fierce debate in the early eighties between Bhabani Sen Gupta and K. Subrahmanyam on the advisability of India going further to operationalize its nuclear capabilities. It was recognized by Bhabani Sen Gupta that, if India went nuclear, Pakistan's nuclearization was inevitable.

Mutual nuclear deterrence would then erode India's conventional superiority, and equate Pakistan with India in the military sphere. Further, Pakistan's hostility towards India would not cease, but enter subterranean channels. On the other hand, K. Subrahmanyam made the nationalist and realist argument that nuclear weapons were necessary to enable India's security against Pakistan and China, and to ensure that India takes its rightful place in the comity of nations. Both 'nationalism' and 'realism' were viewed differently by Bhabani and K.S. deriving from their diametrically opposed views of what constituted the essence of national security. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

India displayed its nuclear capabilities in 1998 for plainly ideological reasons. Pakistan followed suit. It was not idle over the 1974-1998 period, and had

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acquired critical technical support from China. In consequence, a state of 'non-weaponized' or 'recessed' deterrence had been established between India and Pakistan. A nuclear element was, in fact, evident in all the Indo-Pak crises that occurred between 1974 and 1998. They include the recurrent crises that occurred over 1984-86 when angst that India would attack Pakistan's nuclear facilities afflicted the latter, drawing in the United States. Later, the Brasstacks Exercise related crisis over 1986-87 and the Kashmir related Spring crisis in 1990 also exhibited a nuclear angle and the United States in a crisis diffusion role. However, this state of 'non-weaponized' or 'recessed' deterrence was consolidated into certainty by an overt demonstration of nuclear capabilities by the two countries in May 1998. Pakistan was thereafter enabled to construct a state of strategic parity with India, despite its evident inferiority in conventional forces.

But, nuclear deterrence has different connotations for both countries. India believes that nuclear deterrence permits a defensive strategy being pursued to assure its national integrity, Pakistan, on the other hand, believes that nuclear deterrence enables its pursuit of an offensive strategy by using militancy and terrorism as the instruments of an activist foreign policy. This became evident during the Kargil conflict and the border confrontation crisis, when India was constrained from initiating hostilities across the border. There is some evidence of its nuclear assets having been shifted by India during the Kargil conflict, and a veiled nuclear threat being held out by Pakistan's Foreign Secretary. During the border confrontation conflict both sides signaled their belligerence by conducting missile tests and issuing threatening statements.

A subsequent analysis of these events by the Indian Army assessed that the strike corps were located some distance from the Indo-Pak border, which ensured unconscionable delays in bringing them into their operational locations. The element of surprise was also lost to India; neither could it disguise the direction of its main thrusts. Since Pakistan enjoyed the advantage of shorter lines of communication, it could move its forces to the border much more swiftly. Besides, India's 'holding' corps on the ground were only geared for taking defensive action. The Cold Start thesis demanded that India should undertake 'shallow offensives' to capture slivers of border territory in Pakistan of peripheral economic or strategic importance to it so that it would not be provoked to launch a major counter-offensive. The gaps

created by Pakistan's counter deployments, however, could then be exploited to extend the ambit of the conflict. In essence, the Cold Start strategy demanded a very carefully modulated offensive strategy being pursued to keep Pakistan off-balance. The overall aim of a 'limited' war would be the destruction of the Pakistan Army's war waging potential and capture of some territory to compel Pakistan to desist from supporting the anti-India terrorist groups.

## II

### DEBATING THE OPTIONS: MAJOR PROBLEMS

All these theoretical propositions have been conjured up by the Indian Army to mitigate its inability to pursue an aggressive strategy against Pakistan after the nuclear tests, and its angst that an offensive could engender a nuclear threat being delivered by Pakistan that could be followed by a nuclear attack. There is no guarantee about when a nuclear threat might be delivered—at the start of the Indian offensive or after it gains momentum, or while the crisis is still developing. It could also be delivered in ambiguous term. There are several other problems that arise in operationalizing the Limited War and Cold Start strategy, which are listed below.

\* First, how shallow should a 'shallow offensive' remain for Pakistan to remain assured and sanguine about its integrity and confident that it need not escalate the conflict? And, what could be areas of 'peripheral economic or strategic importance' to Pakistan that are worth India's efforts to acquire, despite the risk of conflict, which could escalate unpredictably?

\* Second, who will take the decision to launch a Limited War, decide on the precise depth of a 'shallow offensive' and what are the areas of 'peripheral economic or strategic importance'? The Chief of Army Staff? The Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee? Or, the Prime Minister? Given India's established tradition of civilian control over the military, it would be the Prime Minister who would take these war and peace decisions, although the Indian Army Chief is always free to make his case for initiating a limited war and emplacing a Cold Strategy for this purpose. Is it likely that the Prime Minister would risk his own position by resorting to such adventurism? Naturally, the Prime Minister would also need to take into account international opinion that would be outraged, and take his Cabinet along.

\* Third, the most perplexing problem remains

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unresolved: how could it be ensured that a limited conflict will stay limited? One of the oldest clichés regarding war is that all operational plans remain valid until the first shot is fired; thereafter the conflict proceeds on its own momentum and on the basis of reaction and improvisation. In these circumstances, how could there be assurance that a limited war will proceed on disciplined lines and remain limited? What is the certainty that it would not escalate in terms of time, space, weaponry and so on?

It is reiterated that the Indian Army's feelings of frustration at not being able to use its conventional superiority to chastise Pakistan is explicable. Hence, it has been argued that, since the establishment of civilian supremacy over Pakistan's Army and its ISI is not a realistic expectation, India should adopt the Kautilyan mandala prescription of developing cordial relations with Pakistan's estranged neighbours, which points to Afghanistan. There is no reason for India to be apologetic. The thought of using Afghan territory for taking the fight into Pakistan has certainly crossed several minds in India's policy establishment, since the ISI has never had qualms about using Nepal and Bangladesh for its strategic purposes.

## III

### EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

The likelihood of Limited War and Cold War gaining traction in a democracy like India is around zero. Its fundamental and irremediable flaw in these strategies is that they were evolved without any inputs from the political leadership. There was some talk of exercising India's military option after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008 by infiltrators from Pakistani. There is none now after the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Above all, India's strategic doctrine must avoid a

repetition of the border confrontation crisis experience, when odious comparisons were made to a certain Duke of York who “marched his troops up the hill, and when they reached the top, he marched them down the hill.” A basic question now arises. In the Indian milieu, operational planning is the business of the Services, and their Operations Directorates are constantly thinking out new and ‘out of the box’ operational plans. But, before they are executed, the Services need to seek the prior approval of the political leadership. This is the obtaining political reality; hence a holistic politico-military strategy needs to be evolved to meet the threat of Pakistan using cross-border militancy and cross-border terrorism to excoriate India. Some elements of this holistic politico-military strategy are discussed below.

First, a greater interaction with the United States is urgently required to deal with the universal threat posed by non-state actors, who threaten regional stability. Pakistan needs to be plainly recognized as the epi-centre of the global threat from terrorism and WMD proliferation, underpinned by religious fundamentalism. The strategic dialog with the United States should incorporate these issues on its agenda, but there is no prohibition on a separate discussion with the United States on these vital issues. The Obama team seems to have moved on happily from its simplistic notion that the Kashmir issue must be settled to the satisfaction of Pakistan before the cross-border terrorism question is addressed.

Second, there is little reason for India to be predictable in its dealings with Pakistan. India might recollect the ancient wisdom of its own Machiavelli—Kautilya, who preached more than a millennium and a half back that the fourfold aspects of foreign policy were founded on sama (reconciliation), dana (gifting), bheda (sowing enmity) and danda (punishment). Unfortunately, Indian policy towards Pakistan oscillates between sama and danda, resulting in all-or-nothing options being pursued like Limited War and Cold Start that could result in a hot, radioactive, end. More subtlety and a greater use of the dana and bheda instrumentalities are needed like generosity on trade issues, which would require the establishment of greater connectivity, a less restrictive visa policy, and attention to the development of joint financial institutions. The art would lie in graduating the four elements of the

Kautilyan policy, and judging when to use which policy.

Third, it is necessary to mention that India has to put its own house in order. The failure to bring the perpetrators of the anti-Muslim riots and killings to justice after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots, has resulted in greater militancy being encouraged and revenge terrorism being strengthened. Obscure political calculations are operating here that require no elaboration, but they do not help to evolve a holistic counter-terrorism policy. A dysfunctional judicial and criminal justice system only adds to the general feeling of a dirigisme Indian state, which is unable to ensure its internal security effectively. Corruption is pervasive at all levels, and this has resulted in Indian civil society being pitted against the Indian State. In essence, this is what the campaigns led by Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev connote, with the Supreme Court weighing in against the Government.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

Robert Gates said in his address at Fort Leavenworth last year: “The future will be even more complex, where conflict most likely will range across a broad spectrum of operations and lethality, where even near-peer competitors will use irregular or asymmetric tactics and non-state actors may have weapons of mass destruction or sophisticated missiles.”

Therefore, India’s security challenges, too, need a more sophisticated response than simplistic solutions like holding out threats of an imminent, limited conventional conflict buttressed by the Cold Start deployment pattern. But, that is a task for the Indian armed forces, its diplomatic community, and its wider strategic elite.