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Holocaust or Hollow Victory **Limited War in Nuclear South Asia**

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Preface

This paper is the product of a three-month research internship at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS). It quickly became clear, once I began the internship in November 2004, that the strategic community in New Delhi had an abiding interest in the concept of limited war. It also became clear that IPCS is a leading engine, and a vital forum, for research on limited war, with a burgeoning body of authoritative work already published by Professor PR Chari.

Much has already been written on limited war, about the problems inhibiting escalation control and nuclear stability in South Asia, with a frequent emphasis on the dangers of waging any war in a nuclear environment. Others, taking lessons from recent history, strenuously advocate limited war, arguing that “strategic space” does exist to accommodate it. But for an issue of such pertinence to Indian defence planning, there seems a lack of balanced assessment on the utility of limited war as a strategic policy option for India. What can limited war achieve for Indian security, and is it worth the risks? My paper seeks to address those issues.

Most of the research was conducted using secondary sources. I was keen to tailor this paper to the South Asian context – it is, after all, an evaluation of an Indian strategic option – and not to examine limited war as a generic theory. So much of the material is specific to South Asia, if not written by South Asians.

I also sought to flesh out ideas through direct contact with the Indian strategic community. With the good name of IPCS and its Director, Maj Gen Banerjee, I was able to gain remarkable access to some key people. This circle of commentators, mostly retired senior military officers with command experience in recent crises like the Kargil war and Operation Parakram, were very eager to share their views with me. In a series of interviews conducted in January, and a seminar held at IPCS in February, I was able to glean insights and opinions that are not readily expressed in printed material. While these interviews heavily influenced my nascent understanding of the subject, attribution to these people is minimal – I have assiduously respected wishes to keep some matters off the record, and wherever some views were corroborated by published material or common sense, I have chosen to omit attribution in the interests of scholarly transparency.

What follows, I hope, is a balanced and critical – though also opinionated – examination of limited war in nuclear South Asia. This is an issue of vast importance, potentially affecting millions. Continued scholarship – including studies of how new doctrines and operational concepts fit in – should be welcomed.

Acknowledgements

No research project is a solitary enterprise. That is especially true in cases, like this one, where the research rides such a steep learning curve. I learned much, and had much fun doing so.

The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies provides an excellent home for many visiting scholars. The senior staff are mindful to cultivate an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and vibrancy, which allowed me to conduct my research and formulate my ideas unfettered by pre-existing positions or agendas. The research staff and support staff ensure that days (and lunchtimes) are filled with the intellectual stimulation and congeniality which makes the creative process positively enjoyable. My thanks to you all.

Many distinguished people outside IPCS, but with happy ties to it, were unreasonably generous to share their time and thoughts (and, occasionally, war stories and dirty jokes) with me. Through interviews and seminars, I owe an enormous debt to the following: Dr Stephen Cohen, Air Mshl Satish Inamdar (retd.), Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (retd.), Maj Gen Afsir Karim (retd.), Lt Gen B.S. Malik (retd.), Lt Gen Vijay Oberoi (retd.), Air Mshl Vinod Patney (retd.), Brig Arun Sahgal (retd.), Mr Pravin Sawhney, Air Cmde Jasjit Singh (retd.), and Dr Swaran Singh.

Finally, as always, there's only so much they could do: any merit in this paper is thanks to them; any faults are mine.

Introduction

On the battlefield, in the heights of the Kargil sector of Jammu and Kashmir in the summer of 1999, two nuclear-armed rivals were engaged in pitched combat. Indian forces fought to regain positions, peak by peak, which had earlier been covertly seized by Pakistani troops and irregulars. Just a year after testing their nuclear weapons, the two embittered neighbours were testing the limits of their restraint and the robustness of their deterrents. Despite bluster from both sides and the world's bated breath, fighting did not spill out of the immediate theatre of operations and neither side launched a nuclear attack. Restraint prevailed, and the war was kept limited. At the strategic level, however, Pakistan's risky adventure had failed and India was rewarded with little more than a return to the status quo. International perceptions of the regional rivals may have shifted, but the essence of India and Pakistan's tortured security situation remained the same. Nothing of lasting strategic significance had been won or lost.

Nevertheless, some months later, spurred by their victory in Kargil, the Indian defence establishment began openly discussing limited war as a strategic option.¹ It was a response, laced with frustration, to the proxy war that Pakistan had been waging in Indian-administered Kashmir since 1989. Exploiting local disaffection, Pakistan began to train and arm local insurgents in their campaign against Indian government forces. That represented a long-term Pakistani strategy of attrition, aimed at sapping Indian military resources and political authority in Kashmir. It was Pakistan's nuclear capability, nascent in the late 1980s and overt after 1998, which provided it with the deterrent to brazenly pursue its proxy war,

¹ C Raja Mohan, "Fernandes Unveils 'Limited War' Doctrine," *The Hindu* (India), 25 January 2000.

and left India hamstrung for strategic options.²

The pattern was repeated after Kargil, as Pakistan adjusted its strategy to increase support for cross-border terrorism, including suicide attacks, against targets in Kashmir. This elicited stern diplomatic responses from India, but little else, until violence spread provocatively to the heart of India, with an armed assault on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. Pakistan's militancy finally triggered a massive response. Making good use of an international environment that had little tolerance for such provocations, Indian leaders immediately launched Operation Parakram, a mass mobilisation of the Indian military along the Pakistani border. Deployed for ten months, and twice coming to the brink of war, Indian forces were finally stood down after an inconclusive standoff with Pakistan.³ Limited war was threatened, but not fought – and once again, when the dust settled, the regional security situation was left largely undisturbed.

This paper explores the utility of limited war as a strategic option for India. It is not a history of classical limited war theory or a narrative of its application in South Asia. It is, rather, an examination of the dynamics that would govern limited war in South Asia, given the cataclysmic dangers of a nuclear environment and the persistence of serious threats to India's national security.

² For useful backgrounds on Pakistan's proxy war strategy, see Verghese Koithara, "Coercion and Risk-Taking in Nuclear South Asia," *CISAC Working Paper*, Stanford University, March 2003, and Gaurav Kampani, "Placing the Indo-Pakistani Standoff in Perspective," *CNS Web Report*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, April 2002.

³ For a comprehensive overview, see V K Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003).

My aim is to assess the strategic value of limited war as a policy option – its effect on Indian security – rather than its political or moral implications.

I argue that in South Asia, limited war suffers a debilitating tension. On one hand, as with war in general, it has a tendency towards escalation, caused by the complexities of regional strategic environment and the political dynamics within both Pakistan and India. On the other hand, if limited war is successfully kept limited, within political restraints, it becomes an ineffectual tool incapable of achieving any lasting, fundamental strategic

objectives. This tension, between dangerous escalation and strategic irrelevance – between holocaust and hollow victory – makes limited war an option of dubious utility, at best. My argument unfolds in three parts: first, I situate and define limited war in the South Asian context; second, I outline the powerful escalatory tendencies at work in nuclear South Asia; and finally, I examine the usefulness of military action in serving strategic objectives. Advocates and planners of limited war seek to address real security issues that confront India – but as I argue in this paper, limited war provides no real answers to those issues.

The Limits of War in South Asia

Like a morbidly calculating game of chess, the concept of limited war arose as an attempt to transfer the cosmic struggle of the Cold War onto a more manageable level of competition. The nuclear arms race and evolving doctrines like Mutually Assured Destruction left US strategists looking for more subtle policy options, somewhere between the extremes of an unthinkable global apocalypse and surrender to communist aggression. Limited war would provide the west with usable military options, where graduated levels of force could be threatened or applied without descending into a nuclear holocaust, where wars could be fought and won for political advantage without mutual devastation. As Henry Kissinger argued in 1957, the option of limited war could also restore credibility to western deterrence – the implausible threat of all-out war had clearly failed to avert crises in Korea, Indochina, and Suez, and the US nuclear arsenal was reduced to a massive but unusable political trump card.⁴

By placing explicit limits on the purposes and conduct of war, the US could effectively respond to Soviet military challenges and proxies, avoiding escalation to nuclear war while also defending its strategic interests.⁵ Limited war thinking met its first significant test in the Vietnam war, an operationally and strategically misguided conflict, but one which nevertheless demonstrated that major wars could be fought within strict confines by nuclear-armed superpowers and their proxies. By the 1960s, limited war theories were developed enough – or absurd enough – to incorporate considerations of limited nuclear war, using nuclear weapons “with restraint” in wartime to defeat the enemy on

the battlefield.⁶ Thus, while elements may be applicable to the philosophy of war generally, classical limited war thinking was a direct response to the problem of managing political conflicts between nuclear-armed rivals.

Decades later, on the other side of the world, another nuclear rivalry has re-ignited interest in limited war. In the remainder of this section I seek to adapt the general concept to the specific context of South Asia. I begin from first principles, using the environment of South Asian security competition to define limited war as any conflict that does not include a nuclear attack. For national security policy-makers, the central consideration that will keep wars below that threshold is the careful calibration of strategic objectives.

The South Asian context

While the strategic environment in South Asia – of rivalry between two nuclear-armed rivals – is superficially analogous to the Cold War, it is actually characterised by important differences. These can be divided into five broad clusters. First, most obviously, the geographical contiguity of India and Pakistan makes their rivalry more acute, which is exacerbated even further by the persistence of an enduring territorial dispute over Kashmir. Their competition is played out on each other’s territory, not some peripheral third party, so the stakes of crises and conflict are intrinsically high.

Second, the historical legacy and communal undertones of the rivalry have imbued it with deeper political resonance – it goes

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1957).

⁵ I owe this point to Stephen Cohen – correspondence with author, 17 February 2005..

⁶ In Herman Kahn’s 44-step escalation ladder, nuclear weapons are introduced at rung 15 and progress through 30 stages of increasing escalation before total war – see his *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962).

beyond instrumental strategic competition, and has become a matter central to each side's national identity.

Third, the rivalry is beset by extant strategic destabilisers that demand urgent attention – there is no stable status quo to defend. India faces an ongoing proxy war that cannot be indefinitely tolerated, and both sides must contend with the unpredictable and potentially explosive effects of the *jihadist* “wild card” – an element supported by Pakistan but ultimately uncontrollable enough that it often represents a separate actor in the strategic equation.

Fourth, the important role of external actors means the region is not a symmetrical nuclear dyad. China's role has recently been shifting away from overt support of Pakistan towards a more disinterested position, while the US has become more actively involved in the region, especially in resolving crises, since the nuclear tests.

Fifth, as recent nuclear powers, India and Pakistan are still refining the quality and safety of their arsenals – reliable second strike capability, command and control, early warning systems, and so on, remain uncertain. Transparency between the two sides and confidence-building measures in the areas of arms, doctrines, and communication systems remain poorly developed.

Taken together, these factors suggest that South Asia cannot readily adopt the highly scripted and contextualised limited war thinking developed in the Cold War. Only a more specific understanding, tailored to the strategic characteristics of the region, can faithfully provide a basis for assessing limited war in nuclear South Asia.

Defining limits: the nuclear threshold

A useful definition of limited war should be precise enough to be translated into operational terms and general enough to be applied across different cases. Most

attempts to pin down the elusive concept focus on visible parameters, a recurring list of dimensions that describe the extent of a war's reach – its height, width, and depth – but fail to capture its strategic significance. Four parameters outlined by V.R. Raghavan represent the standard criteria for defining limited war: the political and military objectives sought; the geographic scope of the war zone; the types of weaponry and force levels used; and the time taken to accomplish certain missions.⁷ But such measures of limited war are abstract and arbitrary – no line on a map or calibre of artillery has an inherently restraining or escalatory effect – and their impact will vary according to the specifics of a particular crisis. Such vague generalised references to relatively modest parameters offer little operational guidance for policy-makers grappling with the next crisis.

Jasjit Singh, in his landmark article, lays out similarly broad defining criteria: a limited war is distinguished by “the aim, scope, and extent to which *conventional military forces* are employed.”⁸ But with this, he implies an ultimately simple standard: a limited war is any war, conventional or sub-conventional, that does not cross the nuclear threshold. Singh's reasoning assumes that mutual deterrence rules out any nuclear exchange (which would lead to total war) as a viable option among nuclear powers. The salience of that definition goes beyond its intellectual clarity – it also has important strategic and operational implications.

The use of nuclear weapons is not just another incremental step in a linear escalation ladder – it carries deep strategic significance, especially in South Asia. A nuclear attack represents a discontinuity, a point of inflexion, beyond which the course of war becomes qualitatively more

⁷ V.R. Raghavan, “Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall-Winter 2001), at p. 7.

⁸ Jasjit Singh, “Dynamics of Limited War,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 24, No. 7 (October 2000), pp.1205-20, at p.1205, emphasis added.

unpredictable and uncontrollable, more closely approximating Clausewitzian total war, where friction and other imponderables become decisive. This is especially true in South Asia, because of the geographical closeness of the rivals, the weakness of regional infrastructure and institutional capacity, and the frailty in particular of the Pakistani state. Even the sparing “tactical” use of low-yield battlefield weapons would have unavoidably strategic consequences – especially if, as declared, India responds with increased retaliation. Beyond the obvious humanitarian calamity of the dead, injured, and displaced, a nuclear exchange would overload and collapse the Pakistani state’s administrative control and undermine the stability of its leadership, and it would elicit a strenuous international reaction, perhaps extending to physical intervention and decades of isolation.

In nuclear South Asia, therefore, the definitional boundary of limited war must be drawn at the nuclear threshold – a limited war is a conventional war. This definition is very specific to the South Asian context – many total wars, even world wars, have elsewhere been fought below the nuclear threshold (although never between nuclear-armed adversaries). In South Asia, the non-use of nuclear weapons implies a limited strategic commitment, especially in Pakistan, where the nuclear arsenal is such an integral element of national defence strategy. Between the nuclear-armed adversaries of South Asia, it is hard to imagine a total war – judged by any other parameters – being fought without the use of nuclear weapons.

This definition also provides leaders with a clear, immutable benchmark for operational planning, suggesting a framework that manages the scale of the conflict and imposes reasonable limits for military objectives. In South Asia, staying clear of the nuclear threshold necessarily implies a limitation in the level of national mobilisation. Wars such as Kargil, which are fought and kept well below the nuclear threshold, do not require a high degree of

national mobilisation. Wars that require mass strategic mobilisation – of the type seen in Exercise Brasstacks and Operation Parakram – are much more likely to trigger a nuclear exchange, and have therefore been forestalled in South Asia. These examples indicate that the nuclear threshold clearly imposes real operational restraint – planners are keen to either fight wars and keep them limited, or wary of launching major wars that threaten to escalate into nuclear wars. So even though the precise boundary of limited war may lie at the nuclear threshold (under my definition), the nuclear benchmark creates a powerful incentive for planners to ensure that full-scale conventional wars in South Asia are not fought. Planning will also be influenced by strategic capabilities – the ability to absorb the costs of mobilisation and war, the ability to provide combat arms with the required logistics and C4ISR support, and of course the ability to bring appropriate and effective force to bear.⁹ Where states lack well-developed capabilities, wars are likely to seek more modest objectives.

Any future war would, therefore, likely be fought at the low end of the conflict spectrum, so it will incidentally be characterised by its relatively modest geographical scope, intensity of operations, and other parameters. But these arbitrary physical dimensions are still secondary – they measure the scale of war without making any qualitative strategic distinction between types of war. My definition, of limited war as a sub-nuclear war, is a meaningful, distinctive category of conflict because it implies a useful degree of strategic controllability and predictability.

Setting limits: the importance of objectives

If the nuclear threshold marks the definitional boundary of limited war, the

⁹ I am grateful to Stephen Cohen for raising this point – correspondence with author, 17 February 2005.

state's objectives provide the best mechanism for limiting it. In translating theory into action, the careful calibration of objectives should be the paramount consideration, for two reasons. First, since war is designed to serve a political purpose, setting strategic objectives is necessarily and logically prior to operational planning. If physical restrictions are laid down, they must flow coherently from the objectives set and must always remain secondary to the objectives.

Second, since war is inherently interactive, it cannot be unilaterally controlled with any reliability.¹⁰ The national security leadership of India only has agency, or deliberate control, over its own objectives – as the conflict progresses, the sanctity of the other contingent parameters will be tested by Pakistan's actions and the fortunes of war. In the Kargil war, for instance, India had pledged not to cross the Line of Control in its defensive operations – but had its efforts not been successful in speedily expelling the infiltrators, military necessity may have compelled it to strike across the Line of Control. Its declared geographical restraint would have had to be violated in order to meet its basic defensive objective.

Careful calibration of objectives is not only the best way for leaders to exercise control over a conflict, but it thereby also offers them the best instrument with which to restrain the conflict and prevent it crossing the nuclear threshold. Once begun, wars invariably evolve, but a clearly-defined strategic objective can contain the potential for the war to expand precipitously. So for Indian leaders contemplating a limited war strategy, the process of clearly delineating the strategic goals sought, and the military objectives thus required, is the most critical factor limiting the conflict. All other restrictions – on the scope, intensity, and duration of the conflict – should then

logically follow from the limited objectives. If managed deftly, the conflict should remain limited – below the nuclear threshold – but as I argue in the next section, the nature of war, the character of the adversary, and the imperative to win are powerful dynamics that conspire to escalate a conflict out of its restraints.

¹⁰ Afsir Karim makes this point as a cause of wars' general unpredictability – interview with author, 12 January 2005.

War and Escalation

The resolution of the Kargil war provides a typically mixed picture of limited war. On the one hand, India waged a successful campaign to expel the Pakistani infiltrators and retake the peaks which had been seized, in a manner that did not escalate the conflict beyond a purely defensive operation; and Pakistan suffered an international humiliation, but reaffirmed to itself the strategic utility of continuing its proxy war.¹¹ On the other hand, the physical restraints placed on Indian operations – in particular the injunction not to cross the Line of Control – resulted in avoidably high casualties and calls for bolder, more militarily sound action.¹² And reports later emerged suggesting that the Pakistani Army had begun to activate contingency plans for a nuclear strike, unbeknownst to Prime Minister Sharif.¹³ The Kargil war showed how conflict could be limited, but how tenuous those limits can be.

More broadly, the Kargil war demonstrated the delicate functioning of the “stability-instability paradox,” whereby nuclearisation of the subcontinent may have introduced an element of strategic stability, but left open the possibility for more low-level conventional or sub-conventional instability. In both Kargil and Operation Parakram,

military operations were conducted or threatened with the expectation that escalation would be rationally controlled before it nears the nuclear threshold.¹⁴ Confidence in this paradox has long driven policy on both sides. Pakistan’s strategy of sub-conventional operations began around 1989, shortly after its acquisition of latent nuclear capability, and intensified, with Kargil and increased cross-border terrorism, after its 1998 nuclear tests. And India’s limited war option is clearly based on the premise, as originally declared by Defence Minister Fernandes, that Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent “can deter only the use of nuclear weapons, but not all and any war.”¹⁵ Empirically, therefore, the stability-instability paradox has generated an increased threat of violence, as both sides endorse the viability of low-level conflicts. But there are no guarantees that low-level conflicts will stay restrained below the nuclear threshold. As I argue in this section, limited wars in nuclear South Asia must contend with powerful escalatory pressures, from structural factors in the regional security competition, from the perceived uncertainty of Pakistan’s nuclear deterrence, and from the imperative for India to demonstrate military credibility.

Structural factors: a dangerous neighbourhood

The constricted geopolitical landscape of South Asia serves to concentrate political conflicts into tighter, more intense contests. The security dilemma certainly operates between India and Pakistan, where even

¹¹ For an overview of the respective lessons learned from Kargil, see Ashley Tellis, Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medley, *Limited Conflict Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis*, MR-1450-USCA (Santa Monica, Ca.: RAND, 2001).

¹² At the climax of the crisis, for instance, General S Roy Chaudhury, a former Chief of Army Staff, commented that, “from a military perspective, there are really no logical solutions that do not involve crossing the Line of Control,” quoted in Raghavan, “Limited War,” p.17 fn42.

¹³ The most famously controversial report is Bruce Riedel, “American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House,” *CASI Policy Paper*, University of Pennsylvania, May 2002.

¹⁴ PR Chari, “Nuclear Restraint, Risk Reduction, and the Security-Insecurity Paradox in South Asia,” in Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne (eds.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vision, 2003), pp.28-52.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mohan, “Fernandes Unveils ‘Limited War’ Doctrine.”

defensive moves by one side are interpreted as offensive action by the other, so that each views security as a zero-sum game. The compressed geographical boundaries only exacerbate these underlying tensions and suspicions. Once military moves are underway, a smaller area of operations would make offensive and defensive movements harder to distinguish, and each side will be particularly cautious since all military operations will be conducted not on the territory of third parties, but on their metropolitan homelands, where population centres and strategic lines of communication are densely arrayed. Important distances are traversed quickly – in the 1965 war, for example, Indian forces were at the gates of Lahore within a day – so compressed geography also creates compressed time-lines.

In times of crisis, the action-reaction cycle is thereby sharpened, forcing faster decisions, with less perfect information, and more opportunities for miscalculation and errors. Each side will endeavour to shorten its own decision cycle, while disrupting the enemy's ability to gather, process, and act on information. Blinded, confused, and desperate, a threatened adversary is likely to commit more forces and escalate out of a cautionary impulse. And an enemy with its back to the wall is more likely to lash out wherever the opportunity presents itself, rather than deliver measured, targeted, restrained blows. At each stage of a crisis or war, each side will feel compelled to demonstrate its resolve, to send a message to the enemy, and deter it at every level of escalation. These dynamics would be present in any crisis situation – they linger ubiquitously, the fog of war – but in a theatre where space and time are compressed, like South Asia, their escalatory effects are especially poisonous.

These escalatory dynamics are not just the stuff of theory and hypotheticals – they have been played out in previous South Asian crises. In the Brasstacks crisis of 1987, the Indian military began conducting a

massive exercise provocatively close to the international border at Rajasthan, which was then matched by a Pakistani mobilisation, in turn triggering heightened alert status in India, and a diplomatic crisis that drew in the superpowers and was finally defused bilaterally at the highest levels. The standard explanation rests on the security dilemma – a series of ill-considered provocations misperceived by the adversary as ill-intentioned offensive actions – and prompts lessons of better communication and signalling in crises.¹⁶ Such escalatory pressures also operate at lower levels of the deployed military. During Operation Parakram in 2002, some armour formations of the Indian Army's 2 Corps had advanced into strike positions, apparently on the initiative of their over-eager Corps commander, who was then summarily relieved of duty.¹⁷ Regardless of the operational intent of deployed forces or the transgressions of field commanders, crises like Brasstacks and Parakram illustrate how the involvement of military forces in crises often carries a momentum that requires high diligence and political will to counter.

Naturally and properly, military leaders have an organisational proclivity (and responsibility) to prepare winning war plans, even while the national leadership may seek restraint for other political reasons. The military's view is necessarily more narrow, driven by the requirements of the military mission, and excludes extraneous political concerns. Moreover, in planning and

¹⁶ For example, Kanti Bajpai, PR Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Stephen Cohen, and Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crises in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995). Scott Sagan goes further, controversially contending that Exercise Brasstacks was a deliberate Indian Army attempt to draw Pakistan into a preventive war before Pakistan's nuclear deterrent matured – see “The Perils of Proliferation in South Asia,” working paper, Stanford University, July 2001.

¹⁷ S. Kalyanaraman, “Operation Parakram: An Indian Exercise in Coercive Diplomacy,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Oct-Dec 2002), pp.478-92, at p.485.

preparing for their missions, military bureaucracies by their nature are more likely to favour offensive doctrines.¹⁸ In South Asia, “the defining emphasis on offence by both sides is the central pattern of their previous wars.”¹⁹ This is particularly relevant, and ominous, in nuclear South Asia because the military bureaucracy is so integral to Pakistani security policy and because India is actively considering the strategic option of punitive (offensive) campaigns – more risky, escalatory postures appear to be in the ascendancy on both sides. At another level, for good operational reasons, field commanders will interpret their directives in ways that afford them the greatest leeway and capacity for action – their priority lies with accomplishing the task at hand, and not with the wider political implications of their actions.²⁰

On top of these dynamics which influence crisis management, policy-makers must also contend with the risks of inadvertent escalation. India and Pakistan are fledgling nuclear powers, saddled with deep historical patterns of animosity and distrust – not the most hopeful conditions for managing nuclear crises. In conflicts that may or may not develop into shooting wars, and then escalate into nuclear exchanges, clear communication with the adversary and reliable control over one’s own forces is essential. Unfortunately both India and Pakistan, to differing degrees, suffer from weaknesses in intelligence on the other side, uncertainty of command and control, over both conventional and nuclear forces, and difficulties in signalling and communicating with the other side. This makes the implementation of escalation control, even assuming decision-makers are sufficiently resolved to exercise it, a daunting prospect.²¹

¹⁸ Barry Posen, *The Origins of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹⁹ Raghavan, “Limited War,” p.9.

²⁰ Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) p.17.

²¹ For a useful survey of escalation control issues, see Michael Krepon, Rodney W. Jones, and Ziad

Faced with these structural escalatory drivers, from the geopolitical environment to the nature of military organisations and the difficulties of crisis management, leaders in Pakistan and India find themselves in an environment where restraint cannot be casually willed, but must be tenaciously imposed. In each of their own states, too, they preside over ingrained impulses that work against the political imperative to limit conflict.

Pakistan: brandishing the threat

Restraint will only prevail in limited war if both sides of the conflict tacitly agree to limit hostilities. Even if India exercises all the reasonable forbearance it can muster, the conclusion of the war ultimately also depends on Pakistan’s calculation that it prefers to end the war rather than continue or escalate it. Pakistan’s emergence as a declared nuclear power, however, has altered those calculations – its nuclear deterrent gives its leaders more room to manoeuvre during crises and a higher resistance to Indian efforts at coercion. India is correspondingly cautioned against provoking Pakistan, further restricting its options – this is “the tyranny of the weak.”²² Pakistan’s assertive nuclear doctrine, its provocative strategic posture, its rigid decision-making structures, and the dark ambiguities that shroud it all, serve to weaken the restraints on its behaviour.

The most important loss of restraint, of course, is the use of nuclear weapons – the point at which war ceases to be controllable, useful, or limited. Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear arms was driven by the need to deter strategic threats from India, but the quality and shape of that deterrence remains unclear. No publicly-available doctrine has specified Pakistan’s “red lines” for a nuclear

Haider (eds.), *Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia* (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2004).

²² Satish Inamdar, interview with author, 14 January 2005.

response, although some well-placed officials have made general comments that constitute an unofficial declaration. In 1999, an op-ed by three authoritative sources stated that Pakistan would only resort to a nuclear strike in the event of a threat to the state itself – if India prosecutes a general war which comprehensively defeats Pakistan’s military or threatens population centres or lines of communication.²³ In 2002, General Khalid Kidwai, head of the Strategic Plans Division, which manages Pakistan’s nuclear operations, almost exactly echoed these criteria. He warned that nuclear weapons would be used if:

- a. India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory (space threshold);
- b. India destroys a large part either of its land or air forces (military threshold);
- c. India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan (economic strangling);
- d. India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates a large scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilisation).²⁴

These are, of course, vague standards based on desperate contingencies. While external analysts may bemoan the lack of clarity in Pakistan’s nuclear policy, uncertainty over its doctrine, and its red lines in particular, is in Pakistan’s interests. Clearer red lines – for instance, defining the specifics of how much conquered territory is too much – would imply that a certain level of damage or incursion is acceptable. They would invite piecemeal “salami slicing” tactics by India, and negate Pakistan’s deterrent. Vagueness keeps India and the world uncertain regarding any use of force, giving pause to

²³ Agha Shahi, Zulfiqar Ali Khan, and Abdul Sattar, “Securing Nuclear Peace,” *The News* (Pakistan), 5 October 1999.

²⁴ Quoted in Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, “Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability, and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan,” *Landau Network – Centro Volta*, January 2002.

Indian leaders and incentive for external powers to intervene to halt the conflict.

One clear message sent by those red lines, however, is that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons to counter a conventional threat – an Indian campaign that seeks to remain limited. At least three times – in the Brasstacks crisis (1987), the “compound crisis” of 1990, and the Kargil war (1999) – Pakistan has, according to reports of varying authenticity, brandished the threat of a nuclear response. In this way, Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal is an integral element of its crisis management and military strategy, not a qualitatively distinct and unusable political tool. In Pakistani thinking, then, a nuclear strike is one step on the same strategic continuum that begins with Pakistan’s proxy war in Kashmir. The deterrent thereby becomes an offensive instrument – “as was demonstrated in Kargil, the threat of a nuclear strike would be held out at the very beginning of small-scale conflict,”²⁵ – designed to checkmate an Indian (limited war) response.

Doctrinally, Pakistan appears to view the nuclear option as a flexible and usable instrument in conflict – General Kidwai has indicated that the doctrine provides for several different options for nuclear use, and Pakistan presumably seeks to enlarge and diversify its arsenal to that end.²⁶ Such a graduated response doctrine, beginning with a relatively less devastating attack – perhaps on counter-military targets on Pakistani territory – would make the threat of nuclear retaliation more credible.²⁷ It would also leave more room for further escalation, presumably with a view to elicit foreign

²⁵ Raghavan, “Limited war,” p.12.

²⁶ Cited in Cotta-Ramusino and Martellini, “Nuclear Safety,” p.6.

²⁷ Stephen Cohen reported a five-stage nuclear escalation ladder which, since Pakistan’s nuclear demonstration in 1998, would now begin with attacks against Indian forces in Pakistan and end with a counter-value attack against Indian cities – cited in Koithara, “Coercion and Risk-Taking,” p.34 fn60.

intervention to end the war. Once again, Pakistan's nuclear strategy here regards nuclear arms as usable, offensive weapons in conflict, and seems prepared to threaten escalation up to and beyond the nuclear threshold.

This aggressive strategy becomes particularly worrisome when set against the background of consistent miscalculations and risk-taking. The Kargil episode clearly illustrates the myopic strategic perceptions of the Pakistani military, and the planners' failure to prepare for obvious contingencies (such as a vigorous Indian defence, or a planned Indian counter-offensive), or to anticipate international reactions and manage perceptions. Throughout the planning and conduct of operations in Kargil, the Pakistani Army remained in jealous control, sacrificing preparedness for secrecy and maintaining control over escalation. Altaf Gauhar, a former cabinet minister, sees it as emblematic of Pakistani strategic thinking since at least the 1965 war – based on the assumption “that the Indians are too cowardly and ill-organised to offer any effective military response which could pose a threat to Pakistan.”²⁸ This perception of India, disproved repeatedly but apparently still held tightly, continues to fuel Pakistan's revisionist strategy over Kashmir, of using force to resolve the territorial dispute.

The narrow structure of Pakistan's national security leadership serves to perpetuate these patterns of thinking. Its military government brings organisational biases that draw its attention to the exigencies of efficiently earning victory in conflict – hence the primacy in Kargil of tactical priorities at the expense of wider strategic considerations.²⁹ The Army has always

²⁸ Altaf Gauhar, “Four Wars, One Assumption,” *The Nation* (Pakistan), September 5, 1999.

²⁹ In a contrary view, Pravin Sawhney asserts that the finer mesh between Pakistan's national and military leadership should allow for better judgments on the fit between strategic and military priorities – interview with author, 12 January 2005. Arun Sahgal echoes this, arguing that the Kargil

commanded tight control over nuclear operations, to the extent that twice – in the 1990 crisis and Kargil – it began preparations for higher readiness without the knowledge of the (civilian) national leadership.³⁰ Even organisationally, then, nuclear weapons stay within the realm of military strategy – and “as a consequence, military considerations, more than any other, are likely to drive [Pakistan's] nuclear policy.”³¹ The nuclear decision-making process is thus distorted, with neglect for other non-military factors, and therefore carries a likely predisposition, as noted above, towards a more assertive and escalatory posture.

India: the imperative of credibility

At the same time, in New Delhi, leaders contemplating a strategy of limited war will be mindful of imposing manageable limits on their objectives for the conflict, lest it escalate to the nuclear threshold. Exerting powerful and growing pressure in the other direction, however, they will also be aware of the need to project enough military credibility to meet those objectives. This taut balance is inherent in limited war: objectives should be carefully calibrated to contain the conflict and ensure it does not cross the nuclear threshold; but it remains a war, where the effective application of force is imperative.

Other powers have grappled with similar challenges – after the scarring experience of Vietnam, the US military turned its attention to crafting a more sensible doctrine to govern the use of force. The result was the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, developed in the shadow of Vietnam and refined to deal with post-Cold War exigencies. The doctrine can be seen as the strategic progeny of earlier limited war thinking – it sought to redefine the equation between strategic

experience taught the Pakistani leadership the importance of careful contingency planning at all levels – interview with author, 11 January 2005.

³⁰ Sagan, “Perils of Proliferation,” p.8.

³¹ Koithara, “Coercion and Risk-Taking,” p.24.

objectives and the use of force, for a nation with overwhelming strength likely to confront more asymmetric conflicts.³² Its original six-part formulation dictated that: only vital national interests should warrant a war; enough resources should be committed for victory; political and military objectives must be clearly defined; these objectives should be continually re-examined; popular support must be secured; and military action should be a last resort only. With these guiding principles, the US would deploy its forces more judiciously and effectively. Other parameters of the potential deployment – its duration, geographic scope, forces used – would not be artificially imposed, as they were in Vietnam. Proper planning should ensure that they develop logically from the strategic and military objectives laid down. This way, wars could both be limited and winnable.

The lessons of Weinberger-Powell, of course, were not always applied – the Somalia intervention (1992-93), directionless and half-hearted, was a humiliating debacle. But more interestingly, the Kosovo war (1999) demonstrated how a limited war could first be mismanaged, and then decisively won, once credible force was brought to bear.³³ In the early stages of the war, the political imperative of preserving the NATO alliance imposed artificial restraints on the use of force – only air power was used against only selected battlefield targets – and as a result, “NATO lost the war in the initial going, and the Kosovar Albanian people paid the price.”³⁴ NATO appeared to lack the commitment to

³² For a useful overview of Weinberger-Powell, see Arnel Enriquez, “The US National Security Strategy of 2002: A New Use-of-Force Doctrine?” *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2004).

³³ Two excellent accounts that make this point are Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000) and Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

³⁴ Daalder and O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p.3.

win. Seeing that these restrictions were hobbling the war effort, NATO expanded its target sets to include strategic assets in Serbia proper, and it openly discussed the possibility of a ground war. The war was won without a land offensive – so that degree of force was not required – but the more punishing air campaign and the threat of troops was enough because it signalled to Belgrade that NATO was committed to its objectives. Credibility was demonstrated by the application of sufficient, well-targeted force, and critically, also by the willingness to escalate further. General Wesley Clark, NATO’s supreme commander in the war, noted that “surely, a key lesson ... is that once the threshold to use force is crossed, nations cannot easily escape from the need to succeed.”³⁵ This imperative to show credibility, and ultimately to win, is a powerful escalatory impulse.

In nuclear South Asia, crises have twice tested India’s credibility to secure its objectives without being daunted by Pakistan’s deterrent. In the Kargil war, India immediately and successfully fought a defensive operation against Pakistani forces – India had no choice but to respond quickly and forcefully. Indian leaders faced a tougher political decision, a tougher test of will, in Operation Parakram – seeking not to reverse a Pakistani incursion, but to impose a set of demands on Pakistan. This time India was the side threatening offensive military action to advance its political objectives. Diplomatic relations were scaled back, transport links cut, and for ten months, the Indian military was mobilised en masse along the international border, twice coming close to initiating offensive operations, in January and June 2002.³⁶ Pakistan responded with a counter-deployment and the international community, led by the US, made frantic diplomatic efforts to cool temperatures.

³⁵ Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p.425.

³⁶ The only book-length study is Sood and Sawhney, *Operation Parakram*.

India's coercive diplomacy was aimed at two audiences: Pakistan, which was served notice that proxy war under a nuclear cover would not go unanswered; and the United States, whose war on terrorism had sharpened its interest in a stable South Asia. Indeed, S Kalyanaraman argues that Pakistan's concessions – pledges by President Musharraf disavowing cross-border terrorism as a policy option – were extracted not at the barrel of the Indian gun, but under the pressure of the international community, especially the US, which feared the effects of escalation.³⁷ But India's success – like Pakistan's submission – was only limited. Pakistan did crack down on some of the terrorist groups it sponsored, but even then, thousands of militants that had been detained in January 2002 were later released, and institutional reforms designed to curb extremism were never effectively implemented.³⁸ Of India's list of demands, Pakistan complied with only the most immediately offensive and tokenistic, while leaving more substantive strategic concessions off the table. Undeniably, Pakistan's lengthy mobilisation in response to Operation Parakram imposed massive economic costs which Pakistan's fragile economy is not well-placed to sustain and absorb such costs.³⁹ And arguably, Operation Parakram was a success because it effected a subtle shift in Pakistan's cost-benefit calculus, forcing a more passive support of cross-border terrorism.⁴⁰ But if

the proxy war is nevertheless part of Pakistani strategy, such a psychological adjustment would probably be reversed as memories of India's mobilisation and international opprobrium fade.

India, of course, did not go to war – it displayed its anger and resolve and, when its impossible demands went unmet, its credibility was found wanting. Credibility, as India's experience showed, is about more than the application of force – it cannot work without deft management of conflict escalation. A threat carries no incentive to act unless there is room for further punishment. With Operation Parakram, India shot up the escalation ladder, and the months of deployment had the effect of normalising the condition of high alert – eroding the capability and morale of the forces, and the credibility of India's threat. Fully mobilised and poised to invade Pakistan, India had only two options available to it: to launch a war or attain some demonstrable, deliverable objectives. The first option, given the size of the forces arrayed, was a threat as grave and worthy of nuclear retaliation as Pakistan is likely to face, and therefore too risky. The second option was impossible, given India's politically implausible demands and President Musharraf's tenuous domestic position. India's bold and frightening display of resolve became self-defeating – all it could do was declare a “strategic relocation” and accept international praise for its self-restraint. The Indian defence establishment was left with a stronger imperative and yearning to demonstrate its credibility in the next conflict.

Given the theatrics of security competition in South Asia, displays of resolve in times of conflict often take on a hue of posturing. But given the deadly nature of that competition, national security leaders in India must transcend the theatrical impulse – which, as Operation Parakram showed, can be counter-productive by eroding Indian credibility – and secure tangible strategic interests. The challenge for Indian

³⁷ Kalyanaraman, “Operation Parakram.”

³⁸ Burgess, Stephen F., “Struggle for the Control of Pakistan: Musharraf Takes on the Islamist Radicals,” in Barry R. Schneider and Jerrold M. Post (eds.), *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: USAF Counterproliferation Center, [2002] 2003), pp.100-01.

³⁹ Indeed, some analysts like BS Malik have suggested that such economic pressure imposed by military crises could provide India with a useful lever to coerce Pakistan in the future – interview with author, 14 February 2005.

⁴⁰ Jasjit Singh, comments at “Limited War in Nuclear South Asia,” IPCS seminar, 14 February 2005.

advocates of limited war, as I argue in the next section, is that on top of all these dangerous tendencies to escalate, inherent in the strategic environment and in the

dynamics of both Pakistan and India, the nature of limited war in nuclear South Asia makes the attainment of real strategic objectives virtually impossible.

War and Strategy

What could India hope to achieve from a limited war? If limited war is to stay limited, below the nuclear threshold, the national security leadership must finely calibrate the objectives that, more than anything else, will inform the shape and size of the war. India may hope to restore the status quo ante bellum in a Kargil-type defensive contingency, or mitigate the clearest and most present threats and extract declaratory policy statements in a Parakram-type coercive contingency. This neatly encapsulates the unsatisfying nature of limited conflicts – that gains and losses are always marginal. In a nuclear environment, any objectives that seek to impose or extract a fundamental strategic concession from the adversary runs an unreasonably high risk of escalating to a nuclear exchange – that, after all, is the purpose of a nuclear deterrent. Inconclusiveness, or at best modesty, in conflict resolution is the price of relatively controllable, politically useful limited wars. In this section I explore that thesis, examining the potential uses of military force in nuclear South Asia, how it could serve strategic objectives, and the emergence of more measured strategy of coercion.

Uses of military force

Notwithstanding talk of future energy pipelines, the decades-long history of estrangement between India and Pakistan has narrowed the field of cooperation which could be leveraged in times of conflict. Non-military coercive measures – such as economic sanctions, trade embargoes, or severing transport links – may all be initial steps taken in a crisis, but their impact would be marginal and their value would be largely symbolic.⁴¹ Military measures,

therefore, take on a greater significance and a more common role in South Asia. If India were to execute the option of limited war, how would military force be used – what would be the objectives and concepts of operations? There are three broad scenario options available, roughly speaking – defensive, conventional, and sub-conventional – though with considerable latitude for variations in each.

The first type of scenario sees India responding, Kargil-style, to incursions into its territory by Pakistani regular troops or militants. In many ways, this type of scenario demands less imagination and initiative from Indian planners, since the objective of operations would be obvious – to expel the intruders. Based on the Kargil model, the decisive military effort would be ground operations to recapture territory, assisted by direct fire from artillery and close air support. With the incursions most likely coming across the Line of Control, the fighting would likely remain contained to Kashmir. But while the strategic objective would be defensive, the Indian military may, for operational reasons, seek to widen the war to other sectors of Kashmir, or even further. Offensive air operations may be used to target Pakistani elements supporting the intruders, or in extreme circumstances, ground forces may even breach the Line of Control if defensive operations in Indian-held Kashmir do not meet ready success. Any escalation, therefore, would be tactical, and Indian leaders would have to exercise astute judgment to prevent it triggering an undesired spiral of escalation. A successful limited war in this scenario would yield no strategic change – only a restoration of the status quo ante bellum – and any gains made

⁴¹ Kalyanaraman, “Operation Parakram,” p.483. An exception, as noted by Gaurav Kampani, would be an Indian decision to abrogate the Indus Waters Treaty. That could have devastating effects, through the denial of water or the deliberate act of

flooding, though it would be met with such international opprobrium to be only a very desperate measure – see “Indo-Pakistani Stand-off in Perspective,” p.16.

by India would be purely political, off the battlefield.

A second type of scenario – far less likely – involves a full-scale conventional war. Such a war may flare as an escalation of a localised conflict in Kashmir, or as the bloody culmination of a Brasstacks-style mobilised crisis. If sufficiently provoked – for example by a successful terrorist strike against the Indian leadership – India may also be forced to initiate offensive military operations as a punitive attack. As recently as Operation Parakram, in 2002, the Indian Army's concept of operations for a full conventional war was to launch a concentrated armoured advance in the Rajasthan sector, drawing Pakistani formations into open positions and defeating them through a high-intensity battle of attrition.⁴² Seizing territory would never be an objective – any land occupied would be regarded only as a tactical asset, a bargaining chip, for negotiating the post-war settlement. The military objective would instead be the destruction of Pakistan's conventional warfighting capability, through "deep, sledgehammer blows" in a joint air-land offensive.⁴³ But with such strategically-significant objectives and such massive levels of force brought to bear, the risks of escalation – a threatened Pakistani nuclear retaliation – would be unacceptable. No planner could confidently expect such a war to remain limited. Land invasions also carry a more potent psychological effect that demonstrates strategic commitment and a menacing offensive intent. This would be especially potent against Pakistan, which has historically feared Indian plots to undermine or dismember the Pakistani state, and

⁴² Sood and Sawhney, *Operation Parakram*, p.81. Gurmeet Kanwal argues that this should remain India's primary military objective in a major conventional war – interview with author, 10 January 2005.

⁴³ Gurmeet Kanwal, "Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold and India's Options," *Air Power: Journal of Air Power and Space Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Monsoon 2004), pp.109-24, at p.123.

figures prominently in their red lines for nuclear retaliation.⁴⁴

Beyond the threat of escalation, capability shortfalls also plague the prospect of a punitive conventional war. Despite India's burgeoning economy and much-touted conventional military superiority over Pakistan, it boasts surprisingly little usable military advantage over Pakistan. The amount of deployable force in the western theatre finds basically operational-level parity with Pakistan – its fails to provide for the 3:1 correlation of forces normally understood as required for offensive operations, and falls far short of the even greater superiority required for offensive operations in the mountains.⁴⁵ India can only exploit its size advantage if an intense, attritive war were to last a few weeks, unlikely in the current nuclear environment. Even then it might be compromised if international arms embargoes cut off vital supplies of ammunition and spares. Conventional wars are therefore unlikely – they would be a heavy drain on resources and prestige when national priorities are focused on growth, they would unduly risk escalation to unacceptable (nuclear) levels.

Nevertheless, Indian planners continue to pursue the option. Most recently, discussions surrounding the release of the new Army doctrine in 2004 mooted a strategic option known as Cold Start, which envisions a more readily deployable and mobile joint force in the western sector, capable of rapid mobilisation and offensive action.⁴⁶ With smaller, more independent

⁴⁴ Satish Inamdar, interview with author, 14 January 2005.

⁴⁵ Offensive superiority in mountain areas should range around 9:1. For a close analysis, see Sood and Sawhney, *Operation Parakram*, pp.145-70. For a contrary view, see Rodney W Jones, "Strategic Stability and Conventional Force Imbalance: Case of South Asia," *Workshop on New Challenges to South Asian Strategic Stability*, University of Bradford, July 2004.

⁴⁶ "Cold Start: The Theory Does Not Match the Capability," *Force*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 2004), pp.32-35.

battle groups, Cold Start's concept of operations would probably involve multiple, shallow offensives against Pakistan along a broad front, rather than the two-pronged deep penetration of the Strike Corps as traditionally constituted.⁴⁷ Cold Start's order of battle should allow a reduction in the drawn-out mobilisation process which, during Operation Parakram, allowed Pakistan to make defensive preparations and allowed the international community to effectively pressure India to desist. With Cold Start, India would hope to exercise its military option unfettered by external diplomatic pressure, and confront Pakistan with military pressure below any nuclear red lines. Implicitly, Indian planners acknowledge that avoiding an escalatory or nuclear response requires more modest objectives, focused on applying incremental military pressure on Pakistan.

That premise, of limited objectives and incremental pressure, underpins the third type of scenario – low-intensity conflict. Sub-conventional operations could be designed to directly target the infrastructure and support networks of militants, either as a punitive strike or in “hot pursuit” following a terrorist attack. Indirectly, such operations could also increase the costs of Pakistani state sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. Doctrinally, the Indian military needs flexibility to conduct a range of operations in a range of contexts – in contrast to the all-or-nothing mass mobilisation of Operation Parakram – with more empowering rules of engagement and the political will to execute them. Special Forces, for example, a capability vital for low-intensity offensive operations, continue to be undervalued and underdeveloped, severely restricting India's options in sub-conventional warfare. They were used in regular infantry roles in the Kargil war, and defensive counter-terrorism functions since, but their potential to conduct offensive, covert operations in enemy territory has yet

⁴⁷ Gurmeet Kanwal, interview with author, 10 January 2005.

to be fully realised.⁴⁸ Indeed, Pravin Sawhney argues that a better use of Special Forces – more independently and aggressively – should form the centrepiece of an Indian strategy of “invisible war,” using covert, low-intensity operations to harass and pressure militants and their Pakistani backers.⁴⁹

Another low-intensity option for India is offensive air operations. Indian strike sorties could target infrastructure in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir that supports the militancy. An air campaign is easier to control, with more precise targeting and more flexibility for commanders to switch target sets, escalating or de-escalating operations as needed, and allowing easier disengagement at the conclusion of hostilities.⁵⁰ Offensive air operations may, however, may also expand to include more strategic targets in Pakistan, such as power stations and bridges, less directly related to the militancy and more vital to the Pakistani state. Even more provocatively, they could easily target assets, such as particular airfields, associated with Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.⁵¹ Whether deliberate or inadvertent, such an attack on Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure would be a senseless act of provocation, threatening Pakistan's most highly-valued strategic assets while achieving, by itself, negligible military gains. Clearly, air operations are a tool that carry considerable potential to inflict strategic pain quickly and easily, but their real utility lies in applying graduated pressure as part of a low-intensity campaign.

At an even lower end of the conflict spectrum, the Indian military could conduct operations other than war – the use of coercive military force in less destructive,

⁴⁸ Pravin Sawhney and Ghazala Wahab, “The Maroon Beret,” *Force*, Vol. 1, No.3 (January 2004), pp.12-25, especially pp.19-21.

⁴⁹ Interview with author, 12 January 2005.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the usefulness of air operations in limited war, see Singh, “Dynamics of Limited War,” pp.1217-18.

⁵¹ Sagan, “Perils of Proliferation,” p.21.

isolated actions. India could, for example, effectively blockade the port of Karachi (though this may encroach on the nuclear red line of “economic strangulation”), or it could extend the range of cross-border artillery firing, escalating those strikes to target terrorist camps or tactically-valuable military positions.⁵² The ultimate purpose of these types of operations, as with limited war generally, would be incremental, to gradually increase the pressure on Pakistan to concede to a political settlement. In all these three scenario types – defensive, conventional, and sub-conventional – the ultimate impact of military force, whatever its intensity or other parameters, lies with the objectives it is used to achieve.

Military force and strategic objectives

Any use of military force, offensive or defensive, must serve a higher political purpose. This was the clearest, most pressing lesson to emerge from the United States’ experiences in Vietnam and Somalia. In each case, the highest levels of the US national security leadership failed to define clear, attainable strategic objectives. Instead, fearful of the effects of escalation, and unwilling to commit resources to match their objectives, the US slid into a protracted, unwinnable conflict. The strategically vacuous Vietnam war, in particular, was exhausting: “unable to strike with decisive effect to end the war at its source, the American effort was reduced to a campaign of attrition measured by body counts and bomb tonnage.”⁵³ For different reasons, both Vietnam and Somalia were driven more by the secondary parameters of limiting war – tight restrictions on types of forces used, rules of engagement, targets, and so on – than by political objectives, and each therefore drifted into directionless morass. No objectives were achieved, US

⁵² Koithara, “Coercion and Risk-Taking,” pp.10, 23.

⁵³ William R Hawkins, “Imposing Peace: Total vs. Limited Wars, and the Need to Put Boots on the Ground,” *Parameters*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 2000), pp.72-82, at p.77.

forces suffered demoralising defeats, and conflicts were left unresolved.

An analogous, if less calamitous, lesson was presented to India, with Operation Parakram. Here, Indian forces were mobilised for a major war, nothing more sophisticated or subtle, which never came; the mobilisation was planned by field commands, not initiated by Army headquarters or the political leadership; and as a military-driven action, operational preparations were not tailored to pre-established strategic objectives.⁵⁴ Without clear objectives to define victory or defeat, without any exit strategy, the mobilisation languished for ten draining months before being called off.

The lesson is clear: as Indian leaders ponder the possibility of limited war in the next crisis, as an instrument of coercion or punishment, their political purposes must be clearly defined from the outset. The specific objectives and policy options for that conflict should be determined according to the constraints of each particular case. There can be no fixed red lines for Indian offensive action against Pakistan – a terrorist attack on Parliament, or greater or lesser provocations, cannot elicit automatic responses without regard for the strategic environment. Pakistan and the international community are not passive recipients of Indian action – their responses will affect the outcome of any Indian strategy. So Indian action – above all defined by the objectives sought – will have to be acutely calibrated, taking into account the conditions of the Pakistani state and leadership and the international environment.

Once the strategic objectives for a particular conflict are set, they must be translated into appropriate operational-level military objectives. Here organisational structures matter. A disjointed and uncommunicative national security leadership is more likely to

⁵⁴ Sood and Sawhney, *Operation Parakram*, p.73.

blunder into military operations without proper direction, and equally, its national objectives are more likely to go unrealised. In launching the Iraq war of 2003, Michael O’Hanlon argues, US military planners acted negligently by acquiescing to the poor and irresponsible plans for post-war reconstruction drafted by their civilian superiors.⁵⁵ The basic point has broader applicability – in line with Clausewitzian wisdom, military operations and strategic considerations are part of the same continuum, with no clear dividing line between them. So to manage the whole range of political-military affairs, national security decision-making must be an organic whole, fusing strategic and military goals and accepting that different levels of planning and decision-making bleed into each other. Such fusion takes on greater importance at the stage of conflict resolution, when both sides’ assessments of military progress – relative victory or defeat – must be closely judged against their strategic objectives.⁵⁶ This is especially true in low-level conflicts of limited war, where tactical and operational issues take on greater strategic significance.

Some background considerations – Indian strategic interests – will remain constant, though the character and degree of their impact may vary.⁵⁷ First and most obviously, India will be concerned with its territorial integrity around the Line of Control and domestic security against the threat of terrorism, defeating or deterring the immediate security threats posed by Pakistani forces and militants. Second, in what is likely to be a highly charged political

environment, Indian leaders will come under domestic pressure to attain deliverable outcomes, mindful to avoid a repetition of humiliating episodes like the Christmas hijacking cave-in. Third, Indian leaders will seek to not derail its broader grand-strategic priorities of economic growth and international prestige with costly or provocative escalatory actions. Fourth, more specifically, they will be careful not to jeopardise India’s recently improving strategic relations with key external powers, especially the US and China. Fifth, careful not to make a difficult situation untenable, India has an interest in maintaining Pakistan’s internal stability, making sure the state does not succumb to radical Islamic or more hawkish military factions. Finally, perhaps most fancifully, India will shape its actions in ways that are most consistent with a favourable long-term solution to the Kashmir issue, which implies minimal international interference, but growing worldwide acceptance of the authority of the Line of Control. Most of these interests, in most cases, would exert pressure on the Indian leadership to maintain restraint in conflict – to prevent the outbreak of open hostilities unless severely provoked or, failing that, to ensure that modest objectives keep war limited.⁵⁸

Working against its national interests, as outlined above, the initiation of a punitive war is likely to drain Indian resources and political prestige.⁵⁹ With such high costs, any

⁵⁵ Michael O’Hanlon, “Iraq Without a Plan,” *Policy Review*, No. 128 (December 2004-January 2005).

⁵⁶ In limited conflicts, political and diplomatic manoeuvres assume a greater role in determining victory or defeat – see Singh, “Dynamics of Limited War,” p.1212.

⁵⁷ A similar, but narrower and more specific, list of objectives is provided by Suba Chandran, “Limited War with Pakistan: Will it Secure India’s Interests?” *ACDIS Occasional Paper*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, August 2004, p.55.

⁵⁸ Jasjit Singh states this more boldly, contending “the primary strategic doctrine for India in the coming two decades would be the *prevention of war*,” – “Army 2020: Synchronising Military Power with National Aspirations,” in Vijay Oberoi (ed.), *Army 2020: Shape, Size, Structure and General Doctrine for Emerging Challenges* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, in association with Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 2005), pp.89-101, at p.93, italics in original. This echoes an argument he made earlier – Singh, “Dynamics of Limited War,” p.1214.

⁵⁹ Similarly, Suba Chandran argues that limited war would be “unlikely” to serve most of the Indian objectives he catalogues – “Limited War with Pakistan,” pp.56-61.

prospective military enterprise must yield important and discrete strategic benefits. In a viciously complex struggle like India's, however, defeating the military threat is only part of the puzzle. Thus the oft-mooted option of destroying terrorist training camps or engaging in "hot pursuit" of militants across the Line of Control may be militarily feasible, but it hardly advances the strategic cause against the terrorist threat. The *jihadi* enemy in Kashmir has no obvious centre of gravity to target – it may variously involve India's poor governance of the local Kashmiri people, the cadres of militants themselves, and the official support received from the Pakistani state. Many of the highest-value terror targets exist in population centres like Lahore, not in the open terrain of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir.⁶⁰ Even after a potential Indian strike, terrorist infrastructure, like terrorist cadres themselves, can be readily reconstituted later, elsewhere.⁶¹ One militarily undefeatable obstacle is the Pakistani leadership's will – as long as the militancy is seen as a viable policy option, it will attract the support of the Pakistani state.⁶² Military action against such targets offers a highly visible, highly symbolic option for India, but clearly, one which does not necessarily promise to resolve these security issues.

Limited war as a coercive strategy

The overriding impediment to that elusive resolution is the strategic parity that Pakistan gained with its nuclear deterrent. Armed with that ultimate trump card, Pakistan's national independence should be guaranteed – so in a limited war, India is

⁶⁰ On the deep infusion of jihadis into Pakistan socio-political structures, see Burgess, "Struggle for the Control of Pakistan."

⁶¹ Kalyanaraman, "Operation Parakram," pp.483-84, and Sonika Gupta and Arpit Rajain, "Interview with General V P Malik," in P R Chari, Sonika Gupta, and Arpit Rajain (eds.), *Nuclear Stability in Southern Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), pp.153-63, at p.156.

⁶² Koithara, "Coercion and Risk-Taking," p.22.

reduced to strategies of marginal coercion. As S Kalyanaraman argues, coercive strategies require both sides to strike a bargain, if only tacitly, to cease hostilities and accept a negotiated marginal shift in their fortunes.⁶³ Coercive force, by its nature, is indirect – rather than directly imposing its will on the adversary through submission, a state seeks to convince its adversary to act by changing the target's cost-benefit calculus. A punitive (limited) war launched by India, such as the one India was preparing with Operation Parakram, would rely on an indirect approach to pressure Pakistan to comply with India's demands. This poses its own difficulties – it increases the gap between the military objectives on the ground and the ultimate strategic objectives of changing Pakistani policy, placing an even greater burden on planners to accurately set the goals of the operation. And it introduces a bundle of uncontrollable variables in Islamabad and Rawalpindi that will influence the final outcome. A coercive strategy therefore ultimately cedes initiative to the enemy – its threshold of tolerance is the decisive factor in determining the outcome. This indirectness makes coercive strategies a very blunt instrument of policy.

The indirectness of coercion in South Asia is compounded in two ways. First, India may seek to coerce not the Pakistani state, but the militancy itself. The extremist legions, cultivated for decades by Pakistan in service of its strategy in Afghanistan and Kashmir, are probably not readily controllable from Islamabad, even if President Musharraf displayed the will to tackle them properly. So military pressure on Pakistan to target extremism would create a longer and less reliable transmission belt between India's policy objectives and outcomes.

Second, as these coercion has unfolded in practice in nuclear South Asia, it seems clear that the more common target of India's and

⁶³ Kalyanaraman, "Operation Parakram."

Pakistan's nuclear-tipped persuasion is not the adversary, but the international audience, especially the US. Each side has used the spectre of nuclear holocaust to engage US interests and world opinion and sought to leverage them to its advantage – Pakistan did it with Kargil, India did it with Operation Parakram.⁶⁴ This has had long-term political effects for India – it may not have ameliorated the direct security threat, but buttressing its military threats with deft diplomatic engagement and international perception management allowed India to emerge from those two latest crises with more international prestige. From Kargil onwards, Indian leaders have learned the importance of cultivating a strong partnership with the US, especially in the new war on terrorism strategic milieu, and painting itself as a burgeoning status quo power.⁶⁵

In the future India may circumvent these indirect avenues and seek to apply pressure more directly on Pakistan. If Indian leaders judge Pakistan's strategy of attrition and nuisance to be the centre of gravity of cross-border terrorism, limited military operations could be employed to increase the pressure on Islamabad. The strategic objective would be to raise the costs of supporting the militancy – for example through a gradual, relatively unprovocative attrition of terrorist-supporting infrastructure – until Pakistani leaders, saddled with a patently self-defeating policy, are forced to reassess their strategy.⁶⁶ Imposing untenable costs on Pakistan would in effect be reversing the decades-long Pakistani strategy of attrition through proxy war. But changing the calculus of Pakistan's preferences would

require a sustained, long-term strategy of coercion that would risk India's hard-won political standing. Moreover, Pakistan would only have to brandish a provocative threat of escalatory retaliation to give Indian planners pause and induce a fretful international intervention.

With any of these coercive strategies, whether more direct or indirect, the military threat must be credible – but it must also be accompanied by a wider strategic effort. Exercising leverage over external actors requires a sagacious reading of the international environment and deft perception management. In limited wars, political restraints make unambiguous military victory more elusive, and the political process of conflict resolution becomes correspondingly more vital.⁶⁷ That India has come away with its international reputation enhanced from recent crises indicates that New Delhi is succeeding in at least that element of its coercive strategy. Moreover, the low intensity of the Kargil war and the absence of any shooting in Operation Parakram demonstrate that political results can be reached, and strategic fortunes do shift, with little or no combat. Diplomacy, rhetoric, and political astuteness matter at least as much as good intelligence, light infantry, and offensive air operations. In the international system generally, and in India's grand-strategic calculations particularly, the salience of military force as a policy option is diminishing. Even in limited war, while military credibility is absolutely critical, it is rarely decisive. The military component of coercive strategies is, in the end, only an enabling component – success, marginal and contingent as it is, comes from an integrated strategic policy.

⁶⁴ As I noted above, Kalyanaraman argues that external pressure was the decisive factor in Pakistan's partial compliance with Indian demands in 2002. See also Koithara, "Coercion and Risk-Taking," pp.6-7.

⁶⁵ Tellis et al, *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella*, pp.53-56.

⁶⁶ Such a coercive strategy was suggested by Jasjit Singh, "Limited War in Nuclear South Asia," IPCS seminar, 14 February 2005.

⁶⁷ Raghavan, "Limited War," p.7.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the nature of limited war is unsatisfying. Force, or the conduct of war, is only a tool designed to create favourable conditions for a negotiated conclusion – in Raymond Aron’s words, “the end of strategy or of the conduct of the war is peace, not military victory.”⁶⁸ The critical shortcoming of limited war, in violation of Clausewitz’s dictum, is that in a nuclear South Asia where each side has the ultimate deterrent, it cannot affect fundamental strategic change. The stakes are limited to marginal victory or marginal defeat, to pressure the adversary, not crush it. So limited war can provide no lasting resolution of the Kashmir issue, and no escape from the basic strategic knot of Pakistan. Victory is redefined – more marginal, more ambiguous. War is reduced to a transitory bargaining mechanism – negotiating with force. And the underlying conflict is left to fester.

Limited war, of course, may not stay limited. The nightmare scenario sees a restricted campaign spiralling out of control, as political dynamics within each country and the intensity of regional security competition boil over. Once war is begun, its inherent Clausewitzian character engulfs it, stretches it, sharpens it – war’s nature is to escalate, to chase credibility and victory. In nuclear South Asia, where time and space is compressed and where temperatures frequently run high, escalation could very quickly turn into holocaust. For this reason, when the next crisis or conflict arises, painstakingly judicious calibration of strategic objectives should be the highest priority.

Both sides must understand that lasting, fundamental strategic objectives – an amelioration of national security threats – is

unlikely to be achieved by force in nuclear South Asia. Limited war, as a strategic policy option for India, may serve some other peripheral interests. After perceived setbacks, a display of resolve and force may satisfy certain domestic political constituencies; or long-term preparation for sub-conventional and conventional contingencies may provide elements of the military with bureaucratic prestige and resources; or a declaratory policy, or even option, of launching punitive strikes in a nuclear environment may effectively leverage international attention. But even where it is useful, force will always be only an enabler – it can only work in concert with a well-considered holistic strategy that combines political and diplomatic grace. In limited war, these attendant non-military considerations become decisive. Military operations cannot effectively target the centre of gravity of a problem like Kashmir, or competition with Pakistan as a whole, without inciting holocaust. At best, the gains achieved by limited military means will be peripheral and reversible. The 1998 nuclear tests in effect forced substantive strategic solutions in South Asia off the battlefield.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Hawkins, “Imposing Peace,” p.3.

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