

INDIA-PAKISTAN: A WAR SCENARIO EXAMINED

BY

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DOCTRINAL SHADOWBOXING

With the last India-Pakistan crisis almost a decade back – in November 2008 to be precise – it appears incongruous to discuss war scenarios. When crises appear to be well behind, wars can only be even more so. However, the periodic rise in temperature between the two states – most recently in the diplomatic spat over the Burhan Wani episode and more significantly over the Pathankot airfield terror attack – indicate that crisis can lurk just over the horizon. Unlike the monsoons that can be spotted and tracked across the subcontinent, crisis can instead appear as a cloud burst. In such circumstance, heeding Clausewitz is wise. Clausewitz rightly held that statesmen must be clear on the kind of war they embark on, lest they demand the impossible of the military instrument. If crisis was to turn into conflict then it must be to the extent feasible on one's own terms. Therefore, a consideration of war scenarios is not without utility.

Precedence exists of such exercise proving timely. Immediately prior to the onset of insurgency in right earnest in the Valley over the turn of the nineties, a quasi factual scenario, Operation Topac, conjured up a scenario of Kashmir going into an ISI induced downward spiral. Six months on, the semi-fictional account could be credited with prescience. The scenario was so compelling that the doyen of Indian strategists, K Subrahmanyam, was misled into believing the paper was factual. Though he later issued an amendment, the

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episode suggests that scenarios – even if seemingly far-fetched in this decade of relative peace – may repay attention.

That said; several reasons are there to criticize scenario building as scare mongering. Pakistan is unlikely to initiate a war; fully knowing that it cannot win. Its army knows that this time round it may not be able to bounce back as it did after its 1971 drubbing. In case it does bite the dust, power would likely pass on to civilians. Given the record of Pakistan's past civilian governments, power could well be contested by extremists taking advantage of the vacuum. Avoiding such a future, entails a war avoidance strategy by Pakistan. This suits India since it is on an upward trajectory that can do without distraction. As an aspiring great power, it would not like a war with Pakistan to re-hyphenate it to Pakistan, tying it down to its region, South Asia. Consequently, India appears embarked on a Pakistan strategy that has the military relegated to third spot, following intelligence and foreign policy occupying the first two rungs in that order of significance. This is in keeping with the Tsun Tsu dictum of winning without fighting.

In effect, at long last, there is no kindle piled high in South Asia. With no kindle, the proverbial spark can at best sparkle and die out as a crisis, one easily managed in light of the experience of the two states in crisis management over the past three decades. The bonhomie between the two government heads adds an additional buffer. Since both powers with influence over Pakistan – the US and China – are wary of instability that besets it deepening, they would be available to act as dampeners, preventing crisis from turning into conflict. This puts paid to the scenario, staple for arm chair strategists over the past decade and half, of a mega terror attack sparking off, a potentially nuclear war.

The scenario had been made plausible by Pakistan's propensity for terrorism and India's doctrinal movement from a defensive mode towards proactive operations. This ensured Pakistan largely turning off the tap of insurgency in Kashmir by mid last decade. It instead transferred the pressure to terrorism in the homeland, culminating in the 2008 Mumbai attack. However, India's conventional makeover accelerating thereafter as a consequence, has suitably

impressed Pakistan. This explains absence of a triggering event since. Even so, Pakistan has taken care to very visibly equip itself with tactical nuclear weapons.

India's doctrinal response to this has been two fold. At the conventional level, it has played nonchalant, excising any mention of nuclear backdrop in its press handouts on military exercises since 2012. Alongside, at the nuclear level, while successfully maintaining a façade of status quo, it has likely moved to a war-fighting nuclear doctrine as against its official version pronouncing nuclear weapons are political weapons for deterrence alone. This new – unstated so far – stance is that lower order nuclear weapons use not being ruled out, lower order nuclear strike backs are not only the best response, but also the best deterrent. The subtext is that thinking on nuclear weapons has moved from taking them as deterring nuclear weapons use to deterring higher order nuclear weapons use. At the conventional level the message is that despite the conflict environment being permissive of lower order nuclear use, conventional operations would continue, buttressed by lower order retaliatory options.

This movement does not necessarily enhance dangers in that the closer coupling between the two levels – conventional and nuclear – enhances deterrence at the sub conventional level. Pakistan - attuned to the Indian doctrinal debate and movement – cannot miss the increased liability it would pay in case of its triggering off a crisis. This would enhance the ISI's control over 'good terrorists'. However, there are also 'bad terrorists', such as those that carried out the Peshawar school attack. Pakistan has been targeting these with vigour, assuming them to have Indian support in a bid by India to whittle Pakistan's concept of strategic depth. With 'good terrorists' at best fed into the Kashmir cauldron in a controlled manner and 'bad terrorists' unlikely to turn on India, the 'Incident Day (I-Day) scenario of a terror attack providing a trigger for war recedes further. Since this threat can be visualized - and since the Pakistani establishment is distanced from it - India can arrive at a crisis *modus vivendi* with Pakistan. Prior covert networking by the national security establishments on this score can be done; rather, should already have been done.

SCENARIO BUILDING

Even so, events can snowball. Take for instance a scenario in which India approaches the UP elections. The preceding social polarization based on communal lines gathers momentum, fed by majoritarian politics. Since this election is crucial to the subsequent national elections, internal politics is on a boil. Jihadists sitting across the border sense an opportunity. The excuse is to pitch for their underdog co-religionists.

These are neither 'good terrorists' nor 'bad terrorists'. They are hardcore extremists wanting to expand unstable spaces that enable them to thrive in the resulting governance and democratic vacuum. Pakistan has the fertile demographic and socio-economic terrain. It has sufficient religious extremism already prevalent on the back of conservative religion inspired political formations such as the Jamaat and people vulnerable to be misled. Once a 'frontline' state, it has been frequented by such jihadists, providing the forum earlier for the formation of the Al Qaeda, the hideout for its chief, Osama bin Laden, and possible hideaways in ungoverned spaces for others. Such spaces have homegrown affiliates of the ISIS. Its cities often witness terror attacks on liberal opinion makers, testifying to the physical and psychological reach of new-age terrorists. The ISIS – at the receiving end of a combined great power roll back in its power base Levant – is attempting to expand the arc of instability to metamorphose and survive. There are many candidate Muslim inhabited areas, stretching from North Africa to Bangladesh. Pakistan is certainly one such in its sights. Pakistan, well aware, and sensing adverse relative strength is running with the hares and hunting with the hounds.

Under pressure elsewhere, they need a valve and an opportunity to break into South Asia. Whereas conservative political parties and societal tendencies towards religious extremism have prepared the entry points for such groups in Pakistan and Bangladesh, India has been relatively immune. However, India's hothouse politics provides an opportunity to break in. The catalyst can be a monster terror attack. Under the circumstance of an upcoming election, the government – that prides itself on doing more for defence – would end up in a commitment trap. It has advertised itself as different from

its predecessor that was in its view limp in approach to terror, best evidenced by a seeming lack of response to Mumbai 26/11. It requires justifying a \$100 billion investment over the past decade and the forthcoming \$200 billion over the coming one. Consequently, domestic and reputation pressures take India down the well rehearsed conventional military response route to sub conventional provocation.

India - believing it has escalation dominance - chances conventional war. A doctrinal reading suggests that the belief is not unfounded. At the sub conventional level, India has the requisite numbers in place in Kashmir to keep a lid on terrorism, and, as witnessed lately, respond to civil unrest, albeit in a heavy handed manner. Its conventional forces are well practiced in the decade and half old doctrine of 'Cold Start'. It has the tactical nuclear weapons: three of the five nuclear tests in Pokhran II were of subkiloton variety and it has the delivery vehicles (Prahaar and Brahmos). This capability enables response to TNW use by Pakistan, relieving India from following through with its unnecessarily escalatory official nuclear doctrinal pledge of counter value targeting. Since it can trade nuclear ordnance – kiloton for kiloton – and such exchanges can only be to Pakistan's detriment, India has escalation dominance that it can cash in on to deliver Pakistan a retaliatory blow.

Political compulsions favouring retaliation and with the military doctrine supportive, momentum could pick up for a 'short, sharp war'. To be sure, deceleration will be there in the form of diplomatic interventions by a concerned international community. These can be fobbed off with India citing precedence in great power initiatives in anticipatory self-defence over the better part of this century. As for the argument that military force will only be counter-productive, in that, Pakistan would be more vulnerable to extremism in wake of a military defeat, India can point to proactive operations undertaken by the US, NATO and Russia as precedence irrespective of potential consequence of expanding terrorist terrain, physically and psychologically. It can point to the limitations built into its conventional doctrine. It can use its official nuclear doctrine instrumentally to ensure diplomatic pressure on Pakistan mounts to stay that country's nuclear hand. A war would be at hand.

ANALYSING THE RESULTING WAR

Following from Clausewitz's warning on foreknowledge of the war being entered into, is the imperative on war aims. Whereas war aims can be preset, war strategy involves grappling with another nation's will and strength. This impacts war aims. A 'better peace' post-war is a fine desire, but needs translation into war aims that can then be further disaggregated into achievable military objectives. In this case, diplomatic warnings on the possibility that war could push Pakistan into an abyss need heeding. The counter argument that these powers have themselves resorted to war is not particularly incisive when seen against the results of such wars, be it in Iraq, Libya or Syria. Clearly, a restrictive parameter would be to ensure that the Pakistani state is not so impacted by military set back as to be dysfunctional thereafter. In other words, its military should not be administered a defeat that makes it lose face, cohesion and public trust. This is at odds with the logic of war, taken as a wrestling match in which the opponent is to be pinned to the ground. Clausewitz said not to demand of war as a means of something it cannot deliver.

Is war limitation, the answer? Can a limited war - with thrusts by land, sea and air, calibrated to hurt, but not defeat or destroy - both preserve Pakistan and serve as retaliation? Can these force Pakistan to rein in terrorists in its midst under a 'Pakistan first' strategy? Can the Indian government caught up in public pressures for dealing firmly with Pakistan, simultaneously also turn these off? This suggests three information operations thrust lines: one at external powers; the second directed at Pakistan; and the third, internal. The first entails reassuring the international community against escalation, even while using diplomacy to pressure Pakistan to adhere likewise. The second, directed at Pakistan, needs to announce the retaliatory aims. Aiming more, such as compelling a Pakistani crackdown on terrorists even while the war is on, would be ambitious. The third is more difficult. Since the scenario has as backdrop elections – provincial and national – domestic politics, not so much from the opposition as much as from within pseudo-cultural and quasi-political formations supportive of the government. These would attempt to link the 'external Other' to the 'internal Other' as part of their political project,

using the war as catalyst. The government cannot continue being placatory to such forces. It would also require sensitizing the public to early war termination, even under less-than-ideal conditions. Prior conditioning can conjure up an image of responsible and mature war conduct and termination, preempting motivated criticism of going 'soft' or, worse, 'chicken'.

Clearly, the military, tasked to deliver, would require being onboard. Past experience suggests its thrust could prove more expansive than the government can permit. In the Kargil War, partial mobilization led to selective manning of the border, even as the theater of operations was wisely restricted as per government policy to the intrusions alone. In Operation Parakram, the military perhaps over-interpreted the government's policy of coercive diplomacy, best illustrated by a few hundred casualties to mine laying and demining. The military operations planned after surprise was lost envisaged all three strike corps launching in the desert sector, an operation the government could scarce permit in light of the nascent nuclearisation of the subcontinent. While the military reportedly demurred owing to equipment shortfalls in 2008, these shortfalls were in relation to what the military wished to inflict rather than what could have been proportionate and timely. This indicates the potential for a Moltkaen tendency within the military – a belief that once the war commences it is the prerogative of the military to pursue to its militarily logical conclusion. Over the long term, this requires senior level professional military education mitigating such tendency and in the event of war, requires tempering by the national security apparatus now reaching maturing, the National Security Council system.

The key question before embarking on war is whether a war would energise the Pakistani liberals or would it favour the extremists? The Kargil War forced a dash by Nawaz Sharif to Washington, enabling pulling out of Pakistani forces. Evicting them would have forced casualty figures up, leading to pressures from both the military and the public to widen the war. The Operation Parakram crisis brought out the liberal strand in Musharraf, culminating in the January 2004 Vajpayee-Musharraf agreement to wind down in Kashmir. To an extent, Pakistan can be said to have delivered, though India has understandably held out for more. The two precedents indicate that Pakistan

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and its army can put national interest, conventionally defined, above Islamic rhetoric. Pakistani society is also no pushover to Islamist overtures. This understanding of Pakistani resilience in face of extremism can act as a pull factor towards war.

The critical point would be how to turn Pakistan – under military attack - into an ally in the wider war against terrorism. Though Pakistan suffered US' Operation Geronimo and stomachs its drone attacks, it would be less amenable to India doing likewise. Over the war's duration, Pakistan would likely harness military power of terrorists, such as making consolidation and the stabilization phase of operations difficult. This would be a redefinition of sorts of strategic depth, hitherto envisaged in spatial terms. In case of military relocation by India – and leaving Pakistani territory eventually would be inevitable – Pakistan would, through information operations, project this as its victory. Face saving for the Pakistani establishment may enable it to take some credit, lest terrorists wangle it claiming that they blunted India's vaunted military. The chief military problem in translation of political aims into military goals is: Can Indian military action put a Pakistani 'el Sisi' in place? Since the answer is of consequence not only to the region but also globally, it is not a war India can embark on prompted merely by domestic political compulsions or ideological impetus of majoritarian formations.

WAR: AN OPTION?

Whereas India has leveraged the conventional level to project power, Pakistan has attempted to neutralise this at the other two levels: nuclear and sub conventional. A hybrid war with the three levels co-extensive can therefore be expected. This is a step-up from the two levels that have so far characterized hybrid war – conventional and sub conventional. Where other professional and dominant militaries have failed spectacularly, such as the US and NATO, it would be imprudent to believe that India can prove more adept. The foes the other militaries chose were not well endowed – Iraq and Afghanistan. Pakistan is a nuclear power, even if one on the brink on failed state status. The latter fact enables Pakistan to hold a gun to its own head,

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one if let off can plunge not only Pakistan but also South Asia into at least half century of avoidable setback.

The aspect not discussed is that with the mainstreaming of majoritarian nationalism and its influence in the strategic debate lately, this may not readily be seen as avoidable. There are instead arguments for hastening Pakistan down to failed state status. Such ideology contaminated strategic advocacy must be seen for what it is, not so much about righting Pakistan as much as furthering a certain political project in India. The hidden agenda in such argument is not about externally directed war aims of retaliation, as much as internally looking war aims to take over India with finality. Consequently, even if war looms as an option because strategizing can make it feasible, it is not quite an option considering what it can potentially do wrought politically in India itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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