

## **STRATEGIC PROACTIVISM APPRAISED THROUGH A CLUASEWITZIAN-TRINITARIAN LENS**

BY

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Midway through its term the government has indicated a shift towards strategic proactivism. By launching 'surgical strikes' in reprisal for the Uri terror attack and taking public credit for these it has upped-the-ante. Whereas surgical strikes were not absent earlier from India's repertoire of anti-terror responses, this time round India has acknowledged these and the strikes were across a larger frontage. The political leadership has taken credit for ordering the strikes, attributing it variously to leadership boldness and ideological affiliations of members of the ruling party. This political brouhaha in wake of the strikes was possibly prompted by the opposition criticizing the seeming inaction in immediate wake of the Uri terror attack. The UN General Assembly session behind it and the prime minister's speech in Goa in which he said the war in South Asia should be against poverty, the government timed the attack in a manner as to catch terror launch pads and the Pakistani army with a lowered guard. The retaliation was well received by the people. This interest and involvement of the military, the government and the people in the surgical strike episode brings to fore a Trinitarian analytical framework for viewing the shift to strategic proactivism.

### **Strategic Proactivism Appraised Through a Clausewitzian-Trinitarian Lens**

Clausewitz's perspective on war is that it is a social phenomenon explicable in a framework involving chance, subordination to political imperatives and passion. The three characteristics of war have been associated in Clausewitzian literature with the military, the political class and people respectively. For the military, war is an uncertain enterprise, covered by a fog of war and subject to friction. It requires the military leader to impose order on it and, in doing so, shape it to deliver military objectives. The political leadership is to ensure the control through its subordinate, the military, over war as a means to political ends. The people are associated with elemental hatred and enmity generated in war, utilized by the government and the military as an enabling resource to prosecute the war.

The Uri episode and surgical strikes provide a moment, though not of war *per se*, but of a visible interaction between the three elements of Clausewitzian Trinity in operations other than war. This article attempts such an analysis using the Trinitarian lens and in doing so appraises the immanent shift from strategic restraint to strategic proactivism surgical strikes herald.

#### **THE MILITARY**

The military has been contending with the proxy war for a quarter century. This has been largely defensive, resulting in responsive and reactive operations including those with an offensive bias such as the earlier surgical strikes. This has owed to a strategic doctrine of strategic restraint by this and earlier governments, that relied on strategic reticence in order to ensure, firstly, the husbanding of power over time, and, secondly, to ensure that military digressions do not impact adversely on India's economic trajectory. In the nineties, the military doctrine reflected this strategic doctrine of restraint in its location at the defensive deterrence segment of the continuum of doctrines. However, tested by the Kargil War and the Operation Parakram challenges, the military

doctrine registered a shift within the deterrence segment from defensive to offensive, making for a shift to offensive deterrence in the 2000s. This can be seen in its shift to the so-called Cold Start doctrine and its operationalisation in organization changes and through successive large scale military exercises through the decade. The monies spent of defence have also been considerable, all designed to bolster the offensive content of offensive deterrence. At the tactical level, it has ensured a psychological ascendancy is maintained along the Line of Control (LC) with reprisal attacks following close on heels of terror episodes or Border Action Team challenges on the LC. This also served to restore deterrence at the tactical level, at least temporarily, till the tit-for-tat game on LC between the two militaries set up the next opportunity for offensive tactical action.

Within the military there has been constant discussion on the desirability and possible efficacy of offensive action in response to Pakistani proxy war. The discussion acknowledges the escalatory matrix that inevitably frames military action. It focuses on escalation dominance in order to deter movement up the escalatory ladder. The idea is to be strong at all levels of the spectrum of conflict in a manner as to leave the adversary a choice between persisting with receiving punishment at the current level of military engagement in the spectrum of conflict or escalating to the next higher level, wherein it is similarly disadvantaged by an adverse power ratio.

To illustrate, if Pakistan is unable to compel Indian political action through proxy war due to an apt Indian military counter, Pakistan would be compelled to resort to terror attacks predicated on greater violence. To such mega terror attacks, India has a doctrinal answer at both the subconventional and conventional levels. At the subconventional level, it can deliver a reprisal at the LC through activating it physically and by fire. At the conventional level, it has built in a two step capability, with the first step reliant on the offensive content held with pivot corps and the second held with strike corps. Thus far, it has not resorted to

### Strategic Proactivism Appraised Through a Clausewitzian-Trinitarian Lens

the conventional level, even after the dastardly 26/11 attack, presumably because the capability was then under construction. The government in signaling the shift to strategic proactivism has gone in for fast track purchase of Rs 5000 crore worth of ammunition for air defence, artillery and Su 30s. It has also cleared a Rs 80000 crore equipment purchase.

The shift now to strategic proactivism implies it has a military answer ready and the likelihood of authorization to proceed would be more readily available, certainly at the subconventional level. The likelihood rests on the logic that the surgical strikes were not a one-off episode, but are the new normal at the LC. That would distinguish them from earlier surgical strikes. The emulation on the Kashmir front of the surgical strikes that were last year initiated at the Myanmar border against north eastern terror groups implies there is no stepping back to strategic restraint. Escalation dominance refurbishes offensive deterrence in its entailing of a consistency in reprisal action, especially since Pakistan appears to have upped the terror ante in its series of terror strikes from Dinanagar through Pathankot to Uri.

Escalation dominance at the next level of the conflict spectrum – nuclear – has so far eluded the military. The military is constrained by the declaratory nuclear doctrine and has to *per force* to genuflect towards it in its discussions on nuclear retaliation. However, it is clear that environmental consequence of ‘massive’ nuclear retaliation is unsustainable. The pollution levels in Delhi in early November resulting from farmers in Punjab burning their fields testify that north India cannot sustain the effect of burning Pakistani cities. Coming up with an answer to Pakistan’s tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) is therefore necessary. Not only is ‘massive’ nuclear retaliation not credible, it is also not ‘wise’ (to paraphrase Tom Shelling) in that it opens up India’s cities to like retaliation. The answer stares India in the face – proportional retaliation.

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India has the capability resting on its range of short range missiles – Prahaar – and on sub-kiloton weapons. For the military, this implies an expectation of nuclearisation of the battlefield. This means it must be able to fight through nuclear conditions and its Strategic Forces Command must be able to employ TNW in conjunction with the conventional battle. The aim of proportional retaliation would be to ensure that Pakistan does not steal a conventional march over India's offensives, even while signaling both resolve to retaliate in kind and a willingness not to escalate. With assured destruction capability resting on longer range missiles, strategic weapons and a triad, predominance at the next higher nuclear sublevel exists. This will ensure escalation dominance at the nuclear sublevel of TNW exchange, insuring against escalation by Pakistan. Shadowing its nuclear use through proportional response would leave Pakistan with but one option: discontinue nuclear strikes.

To sum up this section, strategic proactivism implies a greater propensity for tactical action on the LC with surgical strikes as precedent. These could be supplemented - in case of mega terror attacks - with conventional level 'cold start *lite*' attacks. A 'short, sharp war' can be ruled-in under strategic proactivism, since a shift from strategic restraint essentially entails unlocking India's military advantage at the conventional level. Obviously, the conventional might so unlocked would require limitation as overriding criteria in employment. Therefore, 'cold start' requires hedging in the form of 'cold start *lite*'. At the nuclear level, it implies moving to a nuclear warfighting capability and intent based on proportionate response, with No First Use remaining sacrosanct.

#### **THE POLITICAL CLASS**

Politicisation of a security issue has not been absent in India. While the government took credit, according to some political analysts with an eye towards UP elections, the opposition too is active in chipping away

### **Strategic Proactivism Appraised Through a Cluasewitzian-Trinitarian Lens**

at the edges using security related issues for its sniping, such as ‘one rank, one pension’ and seventh pay commission award. The assumption that national security requires a non-partisan consensus is turned on its head. An example is the manner the ruling party tried to take credit for ordering the surgical strikes. This provoked the opposition to revealing that such strikes took place on its watch too and, further, to question the efficacy of the strikes to pull the ruling party down a peg or two.

Strategic restraint has been associated with the earlier stints in power of both the National Democratic Alliance and the United Progressive Alliance. The pre-Uri attack phase of the current government witnessed continuity on this score. However, strategic restraint has never been altogether as advertised. Whereas militarily India has been reticent, this may have owed to deficit in capability, making it a restraint born in necessity rather than choice. Also, Pakistan was also relatively less provocative in the UPA period that had taken up the Vajpayee initiative begun in the NDA I period. Four rounds of talks took place, with the fight half way through when 26/11 happened. However, UPA’s go-slow on the initiative – supposedly due to absence of a viable interlocutor in Pakistan when Musharraf went under – and subsequent abandonment after 26/11, has led to Pakistani return to proxy war, one also emboldened by the disaffection in Kashmir played out between 2008 and 2010 and, after a hiatus, over this year. Between 2010 and 2013, UPA II had desultorily resumed talks with two rounds taking place. They were abandoned when UPA II lost its way at the fag-end of its tenure and due to the beheading episode on the LC in early 2013. Strategic restraint thus was an apt doctrine for the period of relatively greater engagement with Pakistan.

However, it was never fully one of restraint, since the intelligence game with Pakistan continued in a proxy war between the two states in Afghanistan, one that also enveloped Balochistan. Since plausible

deniability attend intelligence operations this is difficult to prove, but to be in denial over the incidence of intelligence operations is to deprive the domain of strategic analysis of autonomy from contamination of sentiments emanating from nationalism. Militarily, the conventional forces acquired a new offensive doctrine and created the warewithal. At the nuclear level, the official nuclear doctrine was challenged for sticking with NFU and criticized for its ostrich like behavior in maintaining 'massive' nuclear retaliation as viable in face of the global environmental ramifications of such nuclear use. Politically, there was a consistent refusal to engage meaningfully with Pakistan or shift from military reliant conflict management to politically purposive conflict resolution in Kashmir. Consequently, strategic restraint can be seen more accurately as 'strategic restraint plus' or 'strategic practivism minus'. On the continuum of strategic doctrine it was someplace ahead of offensive deterrence, while being short of compellence. The current day shift to strategic proactivism therefore completes the final step to compellence.

Setting strategic doctrine is essentially a politically driven exercise. The strategic coordinates provide a strategic rationale, but also serve to obscure the essentially political nature of strategic doctrine. The politics of strategic doctrine are not only informed by the external political sphere - international politics and geopolitics – but also by internal politics. For instance, a conservative regime in power would ordinarily have a strategic doctrine coloured by conservative realism. This is what distinguishes, for instance, the Obama presidency from the preceding presidency of Bush and the likely hue of the impending presidency of Trump. Likewise and understandably, the BJP – a conservative political party – cannot but have a conservative realist inclination to its strategic doctrine. This is best evidenced by its choice of national security adviser.

Here is it hazarded that the impetus to strategic proactivism does not lie in the strategic coordinates of India's strategic circumstance alone. Conservative realism would normally be reconciled to a strategic doctrine

### **Strategic Proactivism Appraised Through a Cluasewitzian-Trinitarian Lens**

of 'strategic restraint plus'. In fact, it is possible that the location at strategic restraint plus of strategic doctrine in the UPA years owed to the fear of the UPA of being called 'soft' on security by its right wing challenger, the BJP. Therefore, with the BJP coming to power, a shift was not readily discernible; on the contrary there seemed to be continuity. However, that there is now a shift has been attributed by the defence minister to ideological mentoring under cultural nationalism. This nascent shift to compellence thus has political pedigree, one that needs acknowledging upfront.

This is necessary to do since compellence is widely regarded as more difficult to achieve than deterrence. Since it is widely accepted that India has not entirely succeeded in deterrence, it cannot be said that it would be more adept at compellence. Consequently, the strategic sense behind the shift is questionable. But the answer lying in the political plane, and not the strategic plane, implies that this is a moot question.

### **THE PEOPLE**

The concerns of Indian people are largely existential. There is a visible focus on economic development and its trickle down uplifting all boats. However, there are multiple transformations ongoing in society, which includes social churning and its political fallout. The latter has given rise to cultural nationalism as a means to creation of stability around a central narrative on the nation based supposedly on a common and shared culture. This comprises the majoritarian project in which insecurity is partially welcomed so as to inject a sense of unity and generation of a herd instinct for adherence to the proffered common national narrative. Information war strategies are the primary manner this is furthered, with social media being a significant battleground.

A nuanced retelling of the Uri terror attack is necessary to reprise how people reacted to the Uri attack and the surgical strikes. The Uri terror



attack was by four Pakistani terrorists in which 19 soldiers were killed. However it bears mention that 14 of them died in a fire, as indirect victims. This means that the four fully armed terrorists with surprise behind them managed to kill only four soldiers; one succumbed to wounds later. In other words, had the fire not occurred, there would have been fewer casualties. This tempers the manner Uri terror attack and places the surgical strikes in context. The latter thus appear an overreaction to the Uri terror attack. The national, media-induced hype therefore appears unwarranted. That it has nevertheless been fanned and used to legitimize a strategic shift in India suggests the manner the state has used national sentiment, whipped up by it not only over the episode in question but also over time, for its purpose of pursuing a hard-line against Pakistan.

As seen from the Uri episode, the terrorist has to be lucky but once and security forces always. The subsequent activation of the LC indicates continuing terror attacks and higher threshold reprisals. The popular sentiment appears to be in favour of retaliation in kind. This popular endorsement will serve to legitimise strategic proactivism. The government, having demonstrated a penchant for sudden action ranging from cancellation of talks with Pakistan to clinching the Rs 35000 crore Rafale arms deal and most recently in demonetizing higher denomination currency, would use the popular saleability of the hard-line on security to continue down the strategic proactivism route. In effect, an in-part manufactured public approbation would be buoying a strategic doctrine of unproven efficacy.

## CONCLUSION

The shift to strategic proactivism appears to have a basis in the Clausewitzian trinity: the military, the government and the people. The military had termed its offensive doctrinal shift in the 2000s as 'proactive operations' strategy, presaging the term strategic proactivism.

### **Strategic Proactivism Appraised Through a Clausewitzian-Trinitarian Lens**

It has preferred an inclination towards the offensive and being proactive, since that enables it to take the initiative and maintain it. This is enabled by a shift in the strategic doctrine away from strategic restraint, that the military felt held it back, even if for good economy-centric reasons. For its part, the government's inclination for strategic proactivism owes to its belief that it has finally the military capability in place for military reprisal. It also sees political gain in the hard-line, in part to deny the opposition any claim of continuity in security policies. While the economic domain has largely seen such continuity, the ruling party has maintained that its difference is in its commitment to national security. The public endorsement for the surgical strikes is liable to be stretched as approval of the shift in strategic doctrine. Since strategic affairs is not a plebiscitary field, cautionary advice not to take the public sentiment as a driver of strategy is warranted at this incipient stage of the shift. The look here at the Uri episode in the Clausewitzian-trinitarian framework has been instructive. It suggests that there are strategic impulses at play that owe little to strategic rationality and may have origin in the polity itself. This is the potential Achilles heel of the shift to strategic proactivism.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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