

Mumbai Redux: Debating India's Strategic Response Options

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A deterrent which one is afraid to implement when challenged ceases to be a deterrent.

- Henry Kissinger

A year has elapsed since the Mumbai carnage and there are renewed intelligence inputs about further terrorist attacks on our seaboard. What could be the Pakistani motivations for a resumption of its terrorist assault on India? The Military – ISI complex in Pakistan appears to be under severe pressure due to the ongoing Global War On Terror (GWOT). 28% of its rank and file are ethnic Pathans who are seriously affected by the ongoing operations in Swat and FATA. Is Pakistan seeking an Eastern diversion that can repair the fast deepening Punjabi-Pashtun faultline and enable it to call off the GWOT? For almost three decades India has surrendered the strategic and tactical initiative to Pakistan. We have waged a purely defensive battle on our own territory. Such a reactive and passive stance was understandable in the era of the 1990s when we were trying to revive and liberalise our failing economy. Such a reactive and defensive stance is unsustainable beyond a point. What then are our response options? First, a clear communication of national resolve, that such terrorist mayhems and mass Indian casualties are not acceptable any longer. The second is a rapid fielding of dominant warfighting capabilities that can deter Pakistani militaries asymmetric adventurism. India must deglitch and hasten its defence acquisition process. Secondly, the primary flaw of Op Parakram's was its all or nothing response. India therefore needs to evolve and enunciate a declaratory doctrine for Limited Wars against a nuclear backdrop. This must aim at raising costs for Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism. The Initial responses to Pakistan's terrorist mayhems can be Air Power/Naval Power or Special Forces centric. These should be just, focused, precise and proportionate responses that serve as warning shots across the bow and place the onus of further escalation squarely on Pakistan. These do not amount to war.

The Mass Casualty Terrorist action at Mumbai represented a new order of lethality in Pakistan's unabated Asymmetric Offensive against India. This had started not in 1989 (as is generally presumed), but in 1983 with the ISI's

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unstinted support to the Khalistani terrorist movement in Punjab. For almost three decades, India has passively accepted such provocations. It has failed to retaliate in a proactive manner which would raise costs for Pakistan and compel it to roll back/desist from this Asymmetric Warfare offensive. India ceded the strategic and tactical initiative to Pakistan some three decades ago and one of our glaring failures has been the inability to design and implement a strong and proactive response option to Pakistan's sustained asymmetric warfare offensive.

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The Mumbai strike came via the sea after almost the entire Indian land border had been fenced. It came as a climax of a series of multiple explosive strikes in Indian cities by indigenous ISI funded Tanzeems (like the Indian Mujahideen) which had localised narratives.¹ In Mumbai the ISI used the Punjab based Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and switched tactics from explosive terrorism (where the media can record only the aftermath of an incident) to small arms based hostage terrorism where iconic sites are seized and held hostage to grab eyeballs all over the world.² The three day drama of the LeT in Mumbai made a spectacle out of an aspiring global power. It held India up to worldwide ridicule and prompted a Chinese think tank to state with smug satisfaction, "Mumbai", it said, "put paid to India's big power ambitions."³

The Criminal Justice Model Versus The War on Terrorism Model

Countries the world over have enunciated policies of "Zero Tolerance" of terrorism. In India, we have turned the Zero Tolerance hype to Zero Response in terms of proactive options. India is one of the few countries in the world to have adopted the Criminal Justice Model to fight terrorism. The Rest of the World is following the US War on Terror Model. Pakistan has replicated this in FATA and NWFP. Sri Lanka, our small neighbour to the South launched an all out war, which destroyed the LTTE and eliminated Prabhakaran.⁴ Unfortunately, we in India have become overtly fixated on the Criminal Justice Model which lays heavy emphasis on preservation of democratic principles even at the expense of reduced effectiveness of Counter Terrorism measures.⁵ This has led some Security analysts to carp that at times the Indian concern for the Human Rights of the terrorists seems to far exceed the concern for the Human Rights of their victims.⁶ Unfortunately, some Peace Lobbyists in India seem to find our mounting civilian casualties an irritating detail they would rather have out of the way in their desire to manufacture

instant peace with Pakistan. It makes eminent sense to have peace with Pakistan. The unfortunate reality however is that peace poses an existential threat to the Pak Military-ISI Complex which is the real power centre in Pakistan. Its very power stems from the fabrication of a near existential threat from India. This alone justifies its overriding control of the state apparatus in Pakistan. It needs the Indian threat in order to not just exist, but also thrive and retain control in that state. That is why almost every back channel/track two attempt to secure peace with Pakistan has ended up in a shooting war, or has almost set the stage for another.⁷

The patience of our peacemakers may be inexhaustible. Unfortunately the patience of the long suffering Indian citizens seems to have worn very thin. Over 700 ordinary Indians killed in a single year cannot be treated as an irritating detail by the well intentioned peace lobby. Public opinion in this country was simply outraged by Mumbai. A democratic regime has perforce to be sensitive to public opinion. The Indian Government therefore has wisely decided to put the peace process on hold.

The Indian Prime Minister himself has warned of the LeT's preparations for further strikes on Indian soil. So what happens if Mumbai is repeated in a matter of months, weeks or even a few days?

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One thing is for certain. It cannot then be treated as business as usual. It will seriously dent our deterrent posture and bring into question our will to use force in the defence of vital national interests. It will seriously damage India's image as a rising global and regional power of consequence.

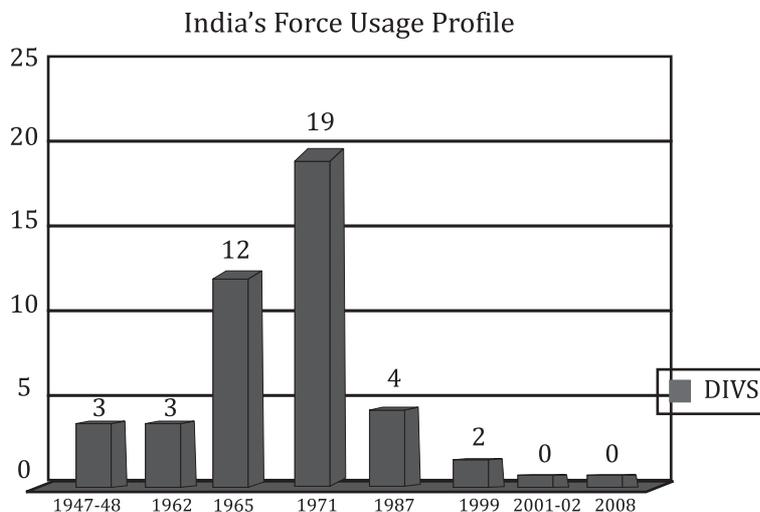
From Massive Response to Zero Response

Deterrence is primarily a mind game. The problem is that India's force usage profile has increasingly been showing a sharp declining trend. Ever since the overt nuclearisation of the subcontinent, the Indian political elite have inadvertently conveyed the impression that conventional conflict is no longer a usable option. Such an impression will seriously call into question India's political will and military capability to use force in the defence of its supreme national interests. This has already seriously eroded the credibility of our deterrent regime and opened needless windows of vulnerability that actually invite more attacks. In terms of Deterrence Theory, it is now imperative to restore our deterrence image.⁸ A failure to do so will needlessly expose our population to the risk of further mass casualty strikes.

The Theory of Limited War

The entire debate on India's response options to mass casualty terrorist strikes is closely interwoven with the debate on Limited Wars against a nuclear overhang. Pakistan has virtually succeeded in imposing a Security Paradigm in South Asia, which seems to rule out the possibility of any Limited conventional war in response to its endless sub conventional provocations. The onus of creating the space for a Limited Conventional War between the spectral ends of Nuclear War, and sub conventional conflict, lies solely on India.⁹ That calls first and foremost for the clear cut enunciation of an Indian Doctrine for Limited War and the consequent evolution of National and Military Strategies for implementing the same in response to any future mass casualty strikes by Pak sponsored non-state actors.

The key factor to remember is that all of India's wars since independence have been limited wars (The 1971 Liberation of Bangladesh could at best qualify as a Quasi-total conflict that achieved decisive results. For the first time after Second World War, it created a new nation state with the force of arms). All of India's wars have been limited and most of them did not cross the tactical level. The Graph below indicates the Number of Army Divisions actually employed in combat since India achieved independence in 1947.¹⁰



Understanding Pakistan has been attempted along several dimensions, such as its relationship with Islam, the inter-ethnic relations there, the elite-mass divide and the manipulation of the state by external powers. However, a salient dimension of Pakistan is that it has a 'guardian' military. Since the Army controls the security, nuclear and India policy of Pakistan, it is at the heart of

India's Pakistan dilemma. The Pakistani Army, as are most other armies, is conservative and realist. It sees India through realism-inspired lenses in which Pakistan is taken as the 'weak power' in a 'weak power – strong power' dyad. Being in control of the state, the Pakistani Army is in a position to execute its strategy of neutralising Indian power, even while stalling India's attempts to reach out to a wider constituency in favour of peace within Pakistan. It follows a policy of a tying down India's conventional military power in manpower

Tactical Phase. What is not well understood is the fact that almost all of India's wars since independence have been limited conflicts. These were initially limited due to the very restrictions of the size and competence levels of the Indian armed forces. The initial phase of Indian military history (from 1947-1962), was the tactical phase. The force levels available and the military competence of Indian commanders of that era constrained / limited force usage to the tactical level alone. In both 1947-48 conflict with Pakistan and the 1962 war with China, the force usage was confined to just three divisions each.¹¹

Phase of Operational Art With the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, India had graduated to the phase of operational art. It had employed a total of 12 divisions and its divisional, corps and field army commanders acquired valuable hands on experience which was to stand them in good stead later.¹²

1971 Quasi – Total War Capability. It was only with the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh, that India acquired the capability and displayed the will to use military force in a decisive manner. 1971 was a quasi – total war that led, for the first time after the Second World War, to the creation of a new nation state with the force of arms. A total of 19 divisions along with India's entire might of Naval and Airpower were employed in a classic tri-service campaign. Indian political and military leaders had displayed the vision and managerial skills to conduct a Quasi-total campaign that achieved a decisive and historic military victory.¹³

Post 1987 Scenario. Post the covert nuclearisation of the sub-continent, there was a distinct down trend in force usage. Never the less India still employed up to four divisions plus in Sri Lanka in a classic power projection role. It was, unfortunately a wrong war in the wrong strategic direction. It locked up India's strategic reserves in the South while Pakistan gained strategic depth in Afghanistan unhindered.¹⁴

Post 1998 Scenario. Post the overt nuclearisation of South Asia, the crippling constraints on India's usage of conventional military force became painfully evident. In response to the Pakistani intrusions in Kargil India carried out partial mobilization and employed two divisions along with airpower. However it restricted their employment to the own side of the LC. By the time of

Op Parakram and post Mumbai, the employment of military force for combat had come down to zero. In Op Parakram, India had mobilized its entire armed

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forces but the "all or nothing", format of this coercive deployment sharply raised the stakes for the decision makers. It thereby paralyzed the military response that could well have been initiated at the lower levels of the escalation ladder. Such a response would have been far more feasible, just and proportionate. It would have transferred the onus of escalation entirely on to Pakistan. Post the nuclearization of South Asia, the Indian political elite seem to have concluded that use of conventional military force is no longer a viable response to sub-conventional provocations. This has led to a sharp and visible decline in India's force usage profile to virtually zero. It has condemned India in perpetuity to a purely defensive response to Pakistan's asymmetric war. This has seriously eroded the credibility of India's deterrence. India therefore, urgently needs to enunciate and practice a credible, declaratory doctrine of Limited War under conditions of nuclear symmetry.

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It may be far better to initiate combat at much lower thresholds of the escalation ladder and place the onus of further escalation solely on the enemy. Any deliberate/inadvertent escalatory moves by him would automatically set the stage for a far stronger response which will then become fully justified. Also such a graduated ratcheting up of violence thresholds provides the time window for a far more methodical, calibrated and effective military response. India must at all times retain escalation dominance and control. There is a need for deliberation as opposed to going into a tizzy that accelerates the pace of events needlessly and militates against a cohesive and well orchestrated response. After all it would take time to the precisely locate the source and identity of the perpetrators of a terrorist strike (This time may well not exceed two/four days or at best a week). The response could then

well commence in the form of firing a shot across the bow by precise and focused strikes on the terrorist masterminds/originators of these mass casualty attacks. Since the ISI sponsored strikes are not confined to J&K anymore, the response need not be confined to PoK alone. Pakistani terrorists have in recent months also struck across the IB in Punjab. Indian air attacks across the IB in response to mass casualty terrorist actions in the Indian mainland would be fully justified. The aims of such retribution should simply be defined as "Raising Costs for Pakistan". Should Pakistan choose to expand the conflict, it should be prepared for a larger scale conventional military conflict that hugely raises the costs for Pakistan's sponsorship of mass casualty terrorist actions on Indian soil.

There is a clear upper limit to India's patience and tolerance. Mumbai has clearly shown the outer edges of the tolerance threshold.

What form should such a Limited War in South Asia take? Should it begin with a Land power thrust a la Cold Start or should it begin with Air and Naval Strikes? Should Airpower pave the way for a well orchestrated Air-Land battle that is force oriented and not terrain oriented in its missions and goals? That seeks to bring to battle and severely degrade Pakistan's strategic and operational reserves, and specifically target the ISI complexes that direct and sustain the asymmetric assaults on Indian soil.

The Cold Start Doctrine

The Cold Start Doctrine was enunciated in the wake of the Op Parakram stand off. Pakistan has the advantage of interior lines in South Asia. The proximity of its cantonments to the border gives it a relative mobilisation differential.¹⁶ However, Pakistan's involvement in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has hugely eroded its Mobilisation Differential. Ordinarily, India would be happy to see Pakistan drain the terrorist swamps in FATA and NWFP. It eminently suits India's security interests. However, the Pakistani formulation that its involvement in the GWOT gives the ISI the right to regularly inflict Mass Casualty terrorist strikes on the Indian population is not acceptable anymore. No country in the world has the right to ask India to indefinitely accept mass civilian casualties simply to keep their population safe. Such a formulation has unacceptable racist overtones and smacks of hypocrisy and double standards. There is a clear upper limit to India's patience and tolerance. Mumbai has clearly shown the outer edges of the tolerance threshold.

India's Cold Start Doctrine remains a viable option in the context of the current force imbalance on Eastern front. However, it suffers from some inherent constraints. Land wars generate far greater levels of the fog of war. They are

more difficult to control and calibrate. A land centric start does not even give the Air Force adequate time to gain a favourable air situation and forces it to concurrently fight the Air Battle and support the surface forces. A switch to the Gulf War-I format may be far more desirable (though that length of Air alone campaign may not be needed in the South Asian scenario).

Air/Naval Centric Response Options

The key differences would lie in how the campaign is initiated. From World War-II onwards, an Air campaign that precedes the Air-Land/Land-Air campaign has become the classical format. The Israeli Blitz of 1967 reemphasised this classical design/operational architecture of any retributory campaign. The First Gulf War pushed it to new limits where Airpower by itself was sufficient to seriously degrade the enemy Armed Forces. The Coalition Ground Forces simply mopped up in the wake of a devastating air offensive that destroyed communication and Command & Control infrastructure and seriously attrited the enemy force in the field.

A mass casualty terrorist strike therefore could be first responded to by precise and calibrated Air/Special Forces Strikes on the originators, their control centres and headquarters, their leaders and critical infrastructure. Should this have originated from the Sea, naval pinpoint strikes could augment the Airstrikes by way of cruise missile attacks and Naval Aviation/Marcos Strikes? This would make India's response just and proportionate. It would be in the form of warning shots across the bow. Such attacks need not be confined to targets across the LC alone, as the triggering attacks have been on the Indian mainland. The onus of escalation would be placed squarely upon the Pakistanis. Partial mobilisation would be concurrently ordered to cater for any Pakistani move to further escalate the situation.

Should Pakistan choose to escalate further, Air and Naval power would be used to set the stage for a well synergised Air Land offensive designed to heavily raise the costs for Pakistan's adventurism. Objectives of these air-land battles would be force oriented and not terrain oriented. Airpower was used to launch an "inside out attack" on the concentric rings of target systems in the state of Iraq. At the innermost ring was the political leadership. It was repeatedly struck. Though it survived, it was kept so preoccupied with survival, that it was rendered dysfunctional for the Command & Control functions. The Communication, Control and Transport infrastructure was significantly destroyed. The fielded forces were then attacked and attrited significantly. This comprehensive air attack set the stage for the 100 hours ground war. The land forces had to simply exploit the phenomenal success of the air campaign. The adversary cooperated in his destruction by surrendering all initiative to the attacker from the very outset. The rest was a foregone conclusion.

Operational Design Architectures

For far too long, India has relied upon deterrence by denial. It has mitigated costs and attempted to limit damage, but done nothing whatsoever to put an end to almost three decades of sub-conventional attacks and mass casualty terrorist strikes. The time has now come to transit from Deterrence by Denial to Deterrence by Punishment.¹⁷ The Air and Naval forces are better equipped to mete out punishment in a precise, focused and carefully calibrated manner.¹⁸ The Land Forces should be the options of last resort and come into play in case Pakistan chooses to escalate to defend its Non-state assets. A very well synergised Land-Air-Sea campaign must then be launched to systematically raise costs for Pakistan. The Indian Offensives must be force oriented and not terrain oriented. These must seek to bring to battle the key components of the Pakistani strategic and operational reserves, and degrade them significantly. The ISI and its infrastructure would primarily be a target of attack in such a campaign.

The aim would not be to overthrow the state in Pakistan or make deep strategic inroads into its territory. The aim would be to set up meat grinders in Pakistani territory that bring to battle and severely degrade key Pakistani military assets. Such a limited war however would be necessary if Pakistan wishes to fight one to defend its non-state actors who have routinely been wreaking havoc in India. This is a choice that Pakistan will clearly have to make. In the last 10 years, its precarious economy has twice reached the brink of collapse. Each time it has been rescued by its foreign patrons. Even a limited war at this stage could tip the Pakistani economy beyond the point of collapse. With the global financial meltdown, there is an upper limit to how much the bankrupt state of Pakistan can be bankrolled and how often it can be bailed out of its self created economic and systemic mess.

When to Give Battle

A key determination of strategy is when and where to give battle. Ashley J. Tellis writing in his celebrated RAND Paper on Stability in South Asia said, "In the security realm India has achieved the path of increased military investment. Defense expenditures that hovered between 3 and 4 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP) in the 1980s have been cut to about 2.5% of the GNP in the 1990s. These reductions in military spending are deliberate (some in fact argue that they are dangerous but to no avail). These have been designed to provide maximum room for sustained economic growth."¹⁹ He continued, "In several interviews with the author in winter of 1995, India's security managers had envisioned the following perspective plan:-

They portrayed the next 10 years (1995-2005) primarily as a period of conservation.

The 2005-2015 time frame was viewed possibly as a period of renewed acquisition.

The 2015-2025 time frame was viewed as a period of integration and consolidation (when presumably India would be ready to take on China or Pakistan or both of them together).²⁰

It is an extremely seductive Perspective Plan (if it exists at all). It suffers however from a high degree of subjectivity and linearity. It fails to factor in the perspective plans and time lines of our adversaries. It conveniently skips over the crucial fact that China began its economic modernisation in 1978 and its military modernisation in 1990. China thus has a 13 years headstart over India in the modernisation process. The core of this perspective thinking seems to suggest that China will patiently wait after its military modernisation is complete for India to catch up. Out of sheer altruism perhaps it will only strike once India is fully prepared. For the next 15 years such a perspective plan has a simple prescription for the Indian citizens who are increasingly falling prey to Pak sponsored mass casualty terrorist strikes – “Grin and Bear it! We will prepare your armed forces in the next decade and a half, so cool your heels. Your impotent rage will only spoil our well crafted timeline.”

India has no option but to field dominant war fighting capabilities in South Asia within next two to five years timeframe at best. We will have to accelerate our arms acquisition process to achieve this. If we do, we may well be able to deter wars. If we do not, we may well have to fight them at a crucial disadvantage, at the timings and places which our adversaries select. The choice of either denouncement however is entirely our own.

In the end one would like to quote the famous Mao Ze Dong who said “*Only a complete fool or a madman would cherish Passive Defense.*” 

Notes

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3. News Item in The Times of India, 03 Dec 2008.
4. Murlidhar Reddy, Endgame, Frontline, 22 May 2009 issue.
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7. Robert G. Wirsing, Kashmir in The Shadow of War: Regional Rivalries in The Nuclear Age, ME Shape Armont, London.
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9. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, The Dynamics of Limited War, Strategic Analysis, Vol XXX No.7, Oct 2000, pp1205-1220. This is a seminal paper on Limited War in the Indian context and sums up the Post Op Vijay debate on Limited Wars initiated by the IDSA (Seminar on Limited War organised by IDSA on 05-06, January 2000 at New Delhi).
10. Maj Gen G D Bakshi, The Rise of Indian Military Power: Evolution of an Indian Strategic Culture, KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2009, pp.09-14.
11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. For a fuller treatment of Just War see Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars and Justice in War*. These lay emphasis on the initial Justifying Occasion. A Just War considers both – A War's purpose and the means by which it is waged. It must satisfy the principle of Proportionality of the Response.
16. For a fuller treatment of India's Cold Start Doctrine see Moeed Yusuf's *India's Cold Start Doctrine: Explaining Pakistan's Stance*, and John E. Peters and James Dickens' *War escalation in South Asia*, RAND Corp, Arlington USA.
17. For a fuller treatment of Deterrence by Denial/Punishment, see Air Cmde Jasjit Singh's Paper *The Dynamics of Limited War*. Refer to note 9 above.
18. Ibid. For a comparative analysis of Land, Air and Naval Forces to inflict punishment, refer to note 9.
19. Ashley J. Tellis, *Stability in South Asia*, RAND Corp, Arroyo Center, Report prepared for the US Army, pp.35-36 .
20. Ibid, p.36