

Cold Start and ‘The Sehjra Option’

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The Cold Start doctrine is an innovative exercise. While Cold Start discusses how to start the campaign, equal thinking needs to attend how to end it. On the conventional level, the learning is that the Cold Start offensives of the integrated battle groups need to be delinked from those of the strike corps. Plausible political aims cannot be visualised that make nuclear risk of launch of strike corps offensives worth running. On the nuclear front, fallout of the scenario considered is on the doctrine of ‘massive’ nuclear retaliation. This has its limitations in reacting to nuclear strikes of low opprobrium quotient. Moving to ‘flexible’ nuclear retaliation countenancing ending an exchange at the lowest possible level may be preferable instead. In the nuclear age, utility of military force has reached its limits. The future lies in energising non-military problem solving approaches.

Introduction

The Cold Start doctrine has drawn much attention and some criticism since its launch in 2004. Gurmeet Kanwal observes that it is a ‘good’ doctrine for India, but it impacts strategic stability adversely.¹ Pakistani insecurity, from being at the receiving end of Cold Start, could result in heightening nuclear dangers. He, nevertheless, suggests that once ‘all the elements of the doctrine are in place’, India would be able to deter proxy war. The assumption behind the doctrine is that there is adequate space for conventional operations, to the extent of launching ‘one or two’ strike corps. This commentary queries the assumption by conjuring a scenario, ‘The Sehjra Option’.

The paper begins with an outline of the doctrine relying on Gurmeet Kanwal’s sketch of it. The doctrine is not in the public domain, it is best to rely on a knowledgeable observer.² Next, the paper dwells on related issues of Cold Start. Lastly, it paints a scenario, dubbed ‘The Sehjra Option’, to problematise the expectation of a high nuclear threshold that under-grades Cold Start.

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Cold Start

Broadly, the genesis of Cold Start owes to the Army's mobilising over a longer timeframe during Operation Parakram; thereby seeing the window of opportunity for conventional operations swing shut. International pressures and, perhaps also Pakistani counter moves and the nuclear threat, conspired to make it stay on the starting blocks then.

Doctrinal developments since and exercises, such as Yodha Shakti concluded this year, have made it minimise this limitation.³ Pakistan is denied the advantage of the proximity of cantonments to the border by speedy launch of "integrated battle groups" (IBGs; divisional-size forces) in 'limited offensive operations to a shallow depth, to capture a long swathe of territory almost all along the international boundary.' Kanwal writes:

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'The doctrine has been carefully designed to avoid crossing Pakistan's nuclear red lines through large-scale offensive operations with Strike Corps deep into Pakistan. By limiting the application of force to divisional-sized thrusts across the international boundary, it carefully avoids risking escalation of any future conflict to the nuclear level...The success achieved by the IBGs would be exploited by one or more Strike Corps, where possible, but without crossing Pakistan's nuclear red lines.'⁴

Two points require attention. The first is Kanwal's statement: 'There are many punitive options short of war available to India to raise Pakistan's cost in waging a proxy war. The Cold Start doctrine is one of them...' Since launch of Cold Start offensives amounts to war, Kanwal likely means 'short of *full scale war*'. Possible subconventional options that are 'short of war' are possibly actions such as activation of the Line of Control, surgical strikes by the Air Force, stand-off missile strikes with Brahmos, land or heliborne raids, fire assaults, covert operations, hot pursuit, border skirmishes etc. Arun Sahgal rightly adduces that Cold Start implies 'war', stating, 'Contrary to the traditional military mobilisation and then going to war, in the Cold Start concept, Pakistani GHQ is concerned that the Indian Army will first go to war and then mobilise.'⁵

Second is to address a seeming contradiction in Cold Start doctrine. Integrated battle groups would comprise 'pivot corps' resources and strike corps resources pre-positioned closer to the border. The tactical aim would be to beat the Pakistani

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defenders in a race from a Cold Start to *their* defences. This explains the term 'Cold Start'. However, even as the race is on, mobilisation of strike corps in the wake of the shallow depth offensives; posturing by the strike corps and 'where possible' launch of 'one or two' of these may occur.

Integrated battle groups are to be launched to shallow depth so as to avoid the nuclear threshold; that strike corps would otherwise nudge. Cold Start is by this logic limited to divisional sized thrusts. Strike corps operations deeper into Pakistan may cross nuclear red lines. However, Kanwal also says that 'where possible' 'one or two' strike corps could follow suit. The question that arises is: Is Cold Start only restricted to integrated battle group operations, or does it also include strike corps offensives?

A plausible answer is that this would be determined by the political aims set and the possible Pakistani counter. Cold Start makes sense in its ability to exploit what Sahgal considers 'adequate space between the conventional and strategic thresholds.'⁶ This option does not necessarily involve offensive use of strike corps. Keeping the strike corps 'powder dry' as punishment held in reserve is useful in tacit bargaining that would go on once war is underway. The strike corps would be in countervailing posture, denying Pakistan any worthwhile space for launching of his offensive reserves. This way the war can be expected to remain considerably below the threshold.

On the other hand, three offensive options are there for employment of strike corps. The first is launch of 'one or more' strike corps, as required to achieve the political and strategic aims, in a seamless manner with the IBGs providing launch pads. The second could be in a counter offensive in case the Pakistani offensive in reaction to Cold Start offensives has first broken through. The third is to assist in attrition of the enemy reserves. This may require maneuvering to threaten enemy objectives, forcing the reserves into exposing themselves; thereby enabling their destruction. Strike corps may have be launched 'where possible' and if necessary, to prise out the Pakistani strategic reserves into battle.

It is not unlikely that Cold Start is restricted to the offensive action of IBGs alone, since fire power is to cause attrition to the Pakistani military. This fire and maneuver at the level of Operational Art would expose Pakistani strategic reserves to decimation by firepower. In other words, strike corps will be launched if Cold Start offensives by IBGs prove less than adequate. Clarity on the issue of whether strike corps would follow seamlessly or they are distinct from Cold Start offensives of IBGs is unlikely to be forthcoming; since keeping the enemy guessing is part of strategy.

Nevertheless, if any of the strike corps are launched, then avoiding the nuclear threshold would be the primary political consideration. It is no wonder then that

General VP Malik discerns that, 'Militarily, the greatest challenge could be in the political reluctance to commit a pro-active engagement and insistence to retain the authority for approving not just key military moves, but also many operational decisions pertaining to deployment and employment of military assets.' The military would require finding plausible answers. Launching only 'one or two' strike corps would not put such pressure on Pakistan as to push it into exercising the 'Samson' option.

Nudging of the nuclear threshold could be avoided by choice of objectives, area of launch etc. Calibration of strike corps offensives could be done by careful choice

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and ensuring operations are restricted in depth. A survey of possible nuclear dangers would indicate the possibilities of offensives beyond the initial Cold Start shallow depth, broad front offensives. Manpreet Sethi is of the opinion that deeper penetration of conventional forces is possible in the desert sector since Pakistan's nuclear hand may be forced if operations are directed into Punjab.⁷ This being Pakistan's heartland, the enemy may go nuclear. Another opinion could be that given the proximity of population centers, nuclear resort may not be done. Instead, the nuclear option may be

better exercised in the desert sector since collateral damage would be least. The likelihood of a nuclear reaction to offensives in the mountain sector is perhaps the least. The nuclear option against an amphibious landing, to counter which troops may not be available, is not impossible to visualise.

To minimise any risk, escalation dominance is to be of such an order as to deter Pakistan.⁸ Firstly, it is believed that India, because of its size can survive a nuclear attack, but Pakistan would be 'finished'.⁹ Secondly, relative advantage in numbers and depth in armament is with India. For instance, India has three strike corps and northern command has reserves for offensives across the Line of Control. India is also raising a mountain strike corps in the eastern sector that could be dual tasked. Posturing through obtaining a suitable position of strategic advantage would be done to deprive General Headquarters Rawalpindi of options. Convinced it would lose even if it escalated to the next level and at greater costs to itself, the military leadership can be expected to stay be deterred from escalatory calculations. Cold Start would be vindicated as a doctrine once 'all elements are in place'. Currently,

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The proactive offensive option of use of force, in its entirety, can be seen as comprising first, the launch of Cold Start limited offensives by integrated battle groups and, second, the possible launch of one or more strike corps deeper. Concurrent with these would be degradation and attrition by fire and posturing by strike corps. Cold Start however cannot be taken in isolation. Even as the Air Force completes its air dominance and strategic bombing tasks, naval maneuvering across the Pakistani littoral and premier port, Karachi, would be underway. Possible intelligence operations involving Pakistan's ethnic minorities may be underway.

The cumulative impact on the Pakistani leadership would understandably be considerable. How would it then view its nuclear assets is a key question. Would it throw in the towel or reach for the nuclear button? Would it wait for the pressure to build or would it act to preempt these? Would the assumption of a high nuclear threshold be sustained? It is here that the Sehjra Option comes in.

The 'Sehjra Option'

The statement of Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, long time head of the Strategic Plans Division, in which he prefixed 'large' to three of the four thresholds he outlined – territorial, attrition, stability and economic.¹⁰ This indicates that the thresholds are 'adequate' enough for conventional operations. A high nuclear threshold makes eminent sense, since no reasonable political aims by either side can be usefully met through nuclear use. Here a scenario is painted to illustrate that the assumption needs being queried.

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A low nuclear threshold has one non-trivial advantage. It is that the nuclear capability – the weapons, organisation, communications and command and control – would be in the best position for use at the start of a war. As the war progresses the ability for nuclear use would diminish. When it is needed it would be less usable. Therefore, a low nuclear threshold needs to be ruled in.¹¹ Secondly the only reasonable aim of nuclear use can be to energise war termination through nuclear signalling.

Its capability to defend being adequate, Pakistan would not require using its nuclear capability against IBGs. Its attention would instead be on India's strike corps. Their release would make the nuclear backdrop come to the foreground. Since escalation then would be fraught with easily discernible consequences for

Pakistan, Pakistan has the option of either reacting to the strike corps offensive, or of preempting such a situation. It is at the juncture after launch of Cold Start offensives that the 'Sehja Option' may present itself.



*Map showing Sehja Enclave and the surrounding area
(Prepared by Vivek Dhankar)*

Sehja is a narrow Pakistani salient of about 10x5 km jutting into Indian territory near Khem Karan, site of the famous battle of 1965. It was understandably captured by India in the 1971 War; but as an after thought to India's loss of the neighbouring trans-Sutlej enclave, Hussainiwala, near Ferozpur. In a future war, in light of India's proactive offensive intent, it can reasonably be surmised that this territory would either be captured, cut off or would fall on its own subsequent to offensives in contiguous areas. At the outset of war, in any case, Pakistani villagers in its ten villages would have likely have fled back to district capital, Kasur to escape the local border skirmishes and improvement of defensive posture that would have begun by both sides. In effect, here would be piece of Pakistani territory empty of its inhabitants, with India on three sides, *available as a tempting nuclear target.*

The 'Sehjra Option' presented here is nuclear 'first use' on the Sehjra enclave of Pakistan amounting to defensive use on its own territory in face of an Indian attack. Damage on the surrounding Indian side can be minimised by the nature of warhead and configuration of strike. For instance, a low air burst of a low yield atomic weapon would not cause much collateral damage. The 'opprobrium quotient' can be further lowered by due warning to enable evacuation. This would preserve the strike from falling under Indian trigger of nuclear retaliation: a strike on India or its forces anywhere. Indian forces having evacuated after the warning would enable the target area to be free of both the inhabitants, who would have departed earlier and the soldiers who would leave on nuclear warning. Early exercise of the nuclear card, as seen here, has war termination potential. Though it risks escalation, the risk may be worth taking for Pakistan given the gains expected of war termination under international pressures. The breaking of the nuclear taboo would be least odious in such exercise.

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Conclusion

The point in bringing up the scenario is to keep a check on analytical complacency. The Cold Start doctrine is an innovative exercise¹². The constructive conclusion that emerges from this review is that while Cold Start discusses how to start the campaign, equal thinking needs to attend how to end it. On the conventional level, the learning is that the Cold Start offensives of the IBGs need to be delinked from those of the strike corps. Plausible political aims cannot be visualised that make nuclear risk of launch of strike corps offensives worth running. On the nuclear front, fallout of the scenario considered is on the doctrine of 'massive' nuclear retaliation. This has its limitations in reacting to nuclear strikes of low opprobrium quotient. Moving to 'flexible' nuclear retaliation countenancing ending an exchange at the lowest possible level may be preferable instead.

Kanwal is right that the doctrine is a 'work in progress'. The doctrine provides a fair start point. He suggests that with all elements in place, it would enable

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compellence; thereby helping with deterring Pakistan's subconventional offensive. However, the question that needs answering is: What would be the consequence of such ability on Pakistan's nuclear card in light of the Sehjra Option? This brings up the tentative conclusion here that with the nuclear age, utility of military force has reached its limits. The future lies in energising non-military problem solving approaches.

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1. Kanwal, Gurmeet, 'India's Cold Start Doctrine and Strategic Stability', *IDSAs Strategic Comment*, June 1, 2010, available at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IndiasColdStartDoctrineandStrategicStability_gkanwal_010610
2. Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd.) is Director of the Center for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), reputedly the think tank of the Indian Army.
3. For a detailed look at doctrinal developments and critique respectively, see Ladwig, Walter, III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's new Limited War Doctrine", *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2008, and his 'An Overview and Assessment of the Indian Army's Cold Start Strategy', Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, May 2008.
4. See Note. 1., Kanwal, Gurmeet, 'India's Cold Start Doctrine and Strategic Stability'.
5. Sahgal, Arun, 'Summer Heat', *Force*, June 2010, p. 32.
6. Ibid., p. 34.
7. Sethi, Manpreet, *Nuclear Strategy: India's March Towards Credible Deterrence*, New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2009, p. 309.
8. General V.P. Malik (Retd.) writes: 'A war may well remain limited because of a credible deterrence or 'escalation dominance' (which means that one side has overwhelming military superiority at every level of violence). The other side will then be deterred from using conventional or nuclear war due to the ability of the first to wage a war with much greater chances of success. For details see Malik, V.P., "Fighting limited wars: A major challenge for the military", CLAWS Article 1590, 3 July 2010, available at http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=591&u_id=49.
9. George Fernandes, when Defence Minister, said as much during the crisis of 2001-02, stating, 'We could take a strike, survive and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished. For details see Chari, P.R., "Limited War against the Nuclear Backdrop", *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Article no. 768, June 2002.
10. "Nuclear safety, nuclear stability and nuclear strategy in Pakistan: A concise report of a visit by Landau Network - Centro Volta", available at <http://www.pugwash.org/september11/pakistan-nuclear.htm>
11. Ahmed, Ali, "Pakistani Nuclear Use and Implications for India", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, No. 4, July 2010.
12. The doctrine has recently been downplayed with the Army Chief. See Manu Pubby, 'No to Cold Start Doctrine: India tells US'; *The Indian Express*, 9 Sept. 2010.