

India's Military Options in a Future 26/11 Scenario*

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Introduction

26/11 gave a sense of déjà vu in the sense of being in a way a repeat of the 13 Dec 2001 attack on the Parliament.¹ India's response on the previous occasion was military mobilisation as part of an exercise in coercive diplomacy.² The outcome was in drawing out a commitment from Pakistan not to allow its territory to be used for terrorist purposes directed against India. Since then, there has been the resumption of the peace process, ceasefire along the Line of Control and a drawdown in Pakistani sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir, best evidenced by peaceful elections there. However, that terrorist infrastructure remains intact in Pakistan was starkly revealed in the well prepared and orchestrated terrorist outrage perpetrated at Mumbai on 26-29 Nov 2008.³ This gave rise to considerable speculation of Indian exercise of the military option in response.⁴ In the event, while the option has been kept open, India has instead relied on diplomacy targeting Pakistan, the UN, the USA and the international community, to bring pressure on Pakistan to take appropriate action against terrorist organisations. Even as the military option has not been exercised, it has been part of the backdrop in the crisis, with the media bringing it to the fore now and then. Should a similar crisis re-enact itself in the future, use of the military instrument may be quite different. Therefore, there is a need to analyse utility of the military option in terms of political aims, military objectives and implications with respect to effectiveness, costs and the nuclear overhang.

Prospects

Likelihood of terrorist outrages. Pakistan has perpetually been on the brink of 'failed state' status over the recent past. This tendency has been accentuated by its frontline status in the global war on terror (GWOT) that has grown to encompass its North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal area (FATA), with terrorist incidents also occurring with increasing regularity and lethality in its hinterland.⁵ With the likelihood of the GWOT increasing in intensity in the vicinity due to the 'surge' in Afghanistan and the stated policy of the new US administration,⁶ there is the possibility of the situation worsening over the middle term before it gets better over the long term. Given that one of the possible reasons for the 26/11 outrage was to divert the Pakistani military from its counter insurgency engagement in FATA and NWFP to its eastern border,⁷ the possibility of a similar attack in the future remains. This could be state inspired, at least partially and covertly, or could have autonomous origin in terrorist strategy against both India and the GWOT. Therefore, the possibility cannot be ruled out.⁸ However, likelihood of the same should not be over inflated as the current conditions that inspired the attack may not recur in the future. Additionally, strengthening of India's deterrent posture in wake of the attack by the laws enacted, investigative agency set-up and the additional security measures and coordination undertaken would also impact terrorist calculus.⁹ State sponsorship, if any, would in all probability get diluted in light of the increased likelihood of India's possible response with a military option in future. However, the internal complexion of the Pakistani state could veer to the 'right' in face of the additional US pressure in the GWOT, which may make a diversion on its eastern front a tempting strategy for the Army-ISI combine.¹⁰

Possible resort to the military option. India has demonstrated restraint and maturity in wake of both the Parliament and the Mumbai attacks.¹¹ It has not allowed the calibration of its policy to be hijacked by war hysteria. However, India has possibly reached the limit of its tolerance levels. Internal politics may compel adoption of a hard-line in face of future testing of its resolve.¹² Media orchestration of public opinion, inevitable in a free democracy, would impact policy. While public mood should not determine policy, democratic accountability requires that it be taken into account as a factor. India's credibility would also require to be demonstrated lest restraint be mistaken for weakness. International community would be more amenable to an assertive Indian response, but with the direction of the GWOT at the juncture duly factored in.¹³ India's military preparations for a set of response options would likely be in place as a result of the lessons learnt from this crisis and would be in a position to execute a response strategy in a short warning scenario. Lastly, having tried mobilisation in Dec 2001 and diplomacy in Dec 2008, and with both being found wanting, there would be a requirement for adopting other options, not excluding the military option.

Contextual aspects

Recalling the Clausewitzian Trinity. It bears consideration that the outcome of conflict is usually uncertain. The only certainty is that change accrues and often outcomes may prove undesirable. This is not only with respect to the levels of attainment of aims of the conflict, but also to internal political complexion of state and society. Therefore, resort to the military instrument is not an exercise that can be done under provocation by a few terrorists, but must be a well considered one. The aspects of 'chance', 'passions' and 'policy', reflecting the concerns of the 'military', 'people' and the 'government' - they comprise Clausewitz's Trinity - combine to make for unpredictability in the outcome of a conflict.¹⁴ In the India-Pakistan case, adversarial history serves as a potentially escalatory backdrop. The second insight of Clausewitz - of the tendency towards Absolute War inherent in conflict - is also relevant to serve as a theoretical context to any consideration of the military option.¹⁵ Therefore, even if political aims and military objectives of a military response option are kept limited to begin with, the over riding aspect of limitation - even without factoring in the nuclear question - necessitates that any response option be first thought through and not one conducted in isolation of and without reference to Pakistan.

Instead, counter-intuitively, getting Pakistan on board by acquiescing with India's action would be an inescapable prerequisite.¹⁶

India's Grand Strategy. India ventured a course correction in its grand strategy by resorting to a change from socialism and non-alignment to liberalisation and a realist foreign policy to cope with the demands of the post Cold War era. This has resulted in its positioning as a potential Great Power today.¹⁷ The premier element of this grand strategy has been its economic policy of faster growth in order to expand the dimensions of the 'cake'.¹⁸ The impact of a military response option on this aspect would be the most important consideration. This impact would be accentuated in the period of global economic recession. This factor would have a dissuasive influence and any military response option would necessarily have to be a limited one with the least escalatory potential.

GWOT. The US presence in the region would have to be reckoned with. India would require making any military decision to be in consonance with the US aims. This would not only be sound diplomacy but would supplement GWOT resources. Since the performance of the Pakistani Army is crucial to the GWOT, any Indian action would require ensuring that it is least diversionary for Pakistani action to its west. Any diversion would result in a vacuum there; with the adverse fallout of giving strategic space to the Taliban to regroup. Therefore, India's aims would require to be overtly and explicitly conveyed to Pakistan. Since this may not be possible when the operation is under execution due to crisis constraints, the possibility should be discussed with Pakistan during the interregnum prior to the next provocation. Doing so would ensure Pakistani reaction can be managed away from being an escalatory over reaction.

The nuclear factor. Bernard Brodie's understanding of the nuclear era has not found a wide audience in India. His conceptualisation of the chief purpose of militaries being the prevention of war has been adapted by India to read – the purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear weapons and not war itself.¹⁹ The Limited War and Cold Start doctrines are a result of this understanding.²⁰ For votaries of the military option, the Pakistani nuclear threshold is 'high' and any interpretation that it is instead a 'low' one is but deterrent posturing by Pakistan.²¹ This understanding has created the space for the military response option despite the nuclear era.²² The Kargil episode demonstrates that it is an understanding shared by Pakistan. Therefore, while there appears scope for employment of a military option, caution is nevertheless warranted.

Strategic Dialogue. Limitation to any military response option is inescapable. Keeping it confined to the lowest rungs of the escalatory ladder would be prudent. Doing this would require a certain amount of concurrence on Pakistan's part. This would entail networking it into acquiescing with India's intent, if necessary with the US intervention on India's behalf as intermediary. This should be done prior to the next attack as the response would likely be executed under a time constraint and in a crisis situation. This unprecedented exercise implies a meeting of minds between the Indian and Pakistani security establishments. The assumption is that the Pakistani security establishment is rational and not the one sponsoring the terrorist act.²³ It's not being in complete control is resulting in terrorist acts against India. Thus to avert an Indian military response drawing a like response from Pakistan and resulting in an escalatory 'tit for tat' spiral, India's military response should instead be met with restraint by Pakistan, if not proactive action by it against the persisting terrorist infrastructure. Incentivising such action by Pakistan is the test of Indian diplomatic strategy in the interim before the next terrorist strike, if it takes place at all. Pakistan could use the Indian military response as an excuse for a turn around and crack down on terrorist organisations under the rationale of the larger national interest. This has precedence, i.e. the manner in which it reacted to the US threat to 'bomb it back into the stone age'.²⁴ A strategic engagement with Pakistan is required, through back channels, if need be.²⁵

Response Options

Political aims and military means. From political aims flow military objectives and strategy. Political aims range from minimal to expansive. In the context of response options these would be formed internally by political pressures, media hype, public outrage and capabilities; and externally by availability of international support and an assessment of Pakistani reaction. Along an ascending order the aims could range from exacting revenge to making Pakistan comply. The former would imply acute limitation in military strategy restricted to 'demonstration strikes' on terrorist infrastructure, while the latter means strategic compellence amounting to Limited War.²⁶ Since escalation cannot be ruled out – there being two actors – a shared understanding of an escalatory ladder needs to be arrived at, so as to enable termination of hostilities at the lowest possible level.

Operationalising the Strategy. Military means would require to be tightly controlled in light of limited political ends. Self-regulation internal to the military would be a necessity. Likewise the media would require to be appropriately managed in order that media fanned public passions do not adversely impact policy. Use of multiple voices and diplomacy through media should be abjured. The opposition would require to be taken on board so that a consensus is presented not only internally but also to the outside world. Maximisation of diplomatic effort should be done simultaneously as the military instrument is only meant to complement these resources. At all times, all channels to Pakistan be kept open to include direct diplomatic, through friendly countries and intermediaries as special envoys, back channel and hotlines.

The Military Option

Prior discussion of the escalatory ladder should be undertaken with the states involved in the GWOT, particularly the US. Compatibility between the operations to the east and west of Pakistan needs to be built in conceptually, a priori. A strategic dialogue needs to be initiated with Pakistan so as to convey Indian resolve and limited intent in wake of a possible future terrorist outrage.²⁷ This would in the event defuse Pakistani over-reaction, permitting termination of the conflict at the lowest escalatory levels. Higher escalatory levels of a Limited War should be avoided at all costs. However, these need be resorted to only in case of usurpation of power in Pakistan by right

wing extremists and in coalition with the international community, preferably with the approval of the UN Security Council. The timeline of response at the lowest level should be earliest. The firebreak between each level should be such, so as to allow diplomatic gains to be made and assessed.

The main limitation of the military option is the implication of its inherently escalatory potential for political aims. It is likely that military coercion would serve to prompt Pakistani nationalism, resulting its cohering at least temporarily, behind its military.²⁸ Such a constellation would push India to further exertion or stand down. Exerting high levels of pressure could prompt the undesirable outcome of rightist forces taking over the state in alliance with fundamentalist elements in society. Pakistani fragility, though taken as being over projected by Pakistan for the purposes of blackmailing the international community,²⁹ should be taken with seriousness as Pakistanis themselves see their 'failed state' status as an existential threat. Since India would prefer to see Pakistan on even keel, the utility of the military option is only for posturing to supplement diplomacy. Resorting to it, however, would be only in an extreme circumstance since India would not like to be deflected from its socio-economic trajectory by the action of a set of terrorists aimed at this very reaction.

Conclusion

The limited gains made so far in wake of 26/11, of getting Pakistani compliance with Indian requirements indicate that next time around there would be greater pressure for adopting a hard line, to include the military option.³⁰ The discussion here has revealed this to be of limited utility. There is, therefore, a need to think through the need for India to engage with Pakistan meaningfully as has been envisaged in the Simla and the Lahore Agreements.³¹ So far India has refrained from doing so in the belief that increasing relative power differentials would eventually lead up to Pakistan band-wagoning with India. This expectation has considerable weight. Incentivising Pakistan to bring this about would be correct prioritisation by India of its grand strategic goals with economic goals taking precedence over power oriented strategic conflict. Contrary to the suggestion of a proactive military response made by some strategists in wake of the Mumbai terror attack, the argument here is instead a 'strategic pause'³² in which husbanding of power indices along the economic and social cohesion vectors are preferred as against the use of military power.

*The views expressed in this article are that of the author and do not reflect USI / Government of India views.

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