India’s Strategic and Military Doctrines: A Post 1971 Snapshot

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Introduction

A state’s strategic doctrine precedes its military doctrine. The political leadership determines the strategic doctrine in accordance with the nation’s values and aims; and the military formulates the military doctrine to reflect and enable the strategic doctrine. Strategic doctrine can be defensive, offensive, deterrent or compellent. For instance, Switzerland has a defensive strategic doctrine that accounts for its defensive military doctrine. Hitler’s Germany had an offensive strategic doctrine that was reflected in the offensive military doctrine of the Wehrmacht. India has a strategic doctrine of deterrence predicated on punishment. Therefore, it maintains a dissuasive defensive posture on the border, even as it has reserves to deliver a counter offensive. Example of a compellent doctrine is that of the US under President Bush. The military doctrine reflecting this was provisioned under Defence Secretary Rumsfeld through the military’s ‘transformation initiative’ of early decade.

Strategic doctrine has been defined by Henry Kissinger as: “It is the task of strategic doctrine to translate power into policy. Whether the goals of a state are offensive or defensive, whether it seeks to achieve or to prevent a transformation, its strategic doctrine must define what objectives are worth contending for and determine the degree of force appropriate for achieving them.”1 Jasjit Singh concurs stating that, “The central driving force for planning for defence, whether articulated in specific documentation or not, remains the strategic doctrine for defence that the country adopts…The twin goals of credible and affordable defence capability really grow out of the national strategic doctrine.”2 Military power is a consequential component of grand strategy, since it is the ultimate arbiter. It is the visible manifestation of the state’s strategic doctrine. The military reflects the strategic doctrine through its military doctrine. The effectiveness of the military instrument is not only a function of military budgets, sound strategy, leadership etc., but also of appropriate military doctrine. Morris Janowitz, termed military doctrine as the ‘operational code’ or ‘logic’ of their professional behaviour.3 Doctrine enables leveraging of military power for ends of policy.

This article traces the relationship between India’s strategic doctrine and military doctrinal development since the 1971 War, given that it was a watershed in India’s post-Independence military history. India’s strategic doctrine has been one of deterrence based on counter offensive capability. But since deterrence was not sufficient to deter the threat from Pakistan in the form of proxy war, the Army moved towards a greater offensive bias in its military doctrine. This has culminated in the proactive doctrine of Cold Start that can be taken to countenance compellence in case of Pakistan’s continued provocation.4 The article covers this ground by a decade wise look at the relationship between the two. It brings out the manner in which the Army has turned towards a more offensive doctrine by incremental shedding of the ‘defensive’ and ‘reactive’ mindset. This has culminated in the offensive content of the 2004 doctrine dubbed ‘Cold Start’. It recommends further evolution of the doctrine in the articulation of a Limited War doctrine also, given that nuclearisation has to be contended with into the foreseeable future.

Seventies

In wake of the 1971 War, K Subrahmanyam outlined the national aim as: “India has to be strong enough to deter interventionism and aggression by other nations but at the same time should not adopt a posture which will induce fears in the minds of other nations.” To him “India had no ideology to export and no big-power interests to defend.” Instead, he required that India keep at “readiness adequate forces to deter China and Pakistan from launching an attack either jointly or individually and in case deterrence fails to repel aggression effectively.”5 With respect to Pakistan, Subrahmanyam argues that “with a clear margin of superiority both in numbers and firepower, it should be possible to deter Pakistan from contemplating any more aggression against this country or invoking external political or military support to pursue a policy of confrontation against this country.” 6 Thus India’s strategic doctrine can be taken as one of deterrence.

The 1971 War represented a quantum leap in Indian employment of the military instrument, from defensive and restrained military operations to taking the war into the enemy’s territory. Post 1971, doctrinally, refinements to the Ditch cum Bund (DCB) concept were undertaken. It was not dispensed with since it had been inspired in part by the experience of the Army at the Icchogil Canal in the 1965 War 7 and was in keeping with military thinking elsewhere, such as the Bar Lev line along the Suez Canal. A writer wrote of the period: “Assuming that in the foreseeable future India’s policies will be mainly defence oriented; the purpose of its defence policy would be to prevent war. The best deterrent to conventional war is the capacity to dominate by force any situation involving offensive action by the enemy. This is justification enough for maintaining a highly mobile and adequately powerful standing army (Choudhary 1976: 208).” 8 Speed in operations was taken as necessary to undercut international pressures for ceasefire. Therefore an offensive capability was required to bring about gains in a short time frame that would be useful on the negotiating table. Carrying the war to the enemy territory required avoiding a frontal assault on his prepared defences. This meant having manoeuvrable forces in order to hit him in depth on his lines of communication, rather than merely inflict casualties. The refrain in service writings was that “In the next war with Pakistan, the deciding factor will be the superior employment of mechanised forces, with emphasis on armour.” 9 These ideas figured in the famous Rao-Sundarji report of mid seventies.

Eighties

To this decade can be traced the strategic dialectic that is ongoing to the present day. The hiatus of the Seventies in Indo-Pak strategic equations was broken by the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union at the turn of the decade. In the event, Pakistan profited from its 'frontline state' status, with knock-on implications for Indo-Pak security relationship. Of the US $ 3.2 billion sanctioned in 1981 by the US Senate, US $ 1.7 billion worth of credit was earmarked for arms sales. These included 40 F 16, AWAC type Hawkeye surveillance aircraft, Harpoon and TOW missiles, M 60 tanks, Vulcan Phalanx air defence systems, 100 sets of airborne and ground communicators, 100 M 45 A 5 tanks, 300 M 113 APCs etc.10 Pakistan's perception was that as the 'guardian of the Khyber Pass', it required a powerful military capability.

Indian strategists vehemently disagreed with this proposition. Cohen writes: "They saw a strong Pakistan as disruptive: their image of regional stability envisioned a Pakistan as an Afghanistan: a weak not a strong buffer."11 Taking this view as an existential threat to itself, Pakistan even during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, did not transfer any forces for the defence of its frontier along the Durand Line. Its threat perception is based on geography since it has its major port, subject to interdiction or blockade close to the border; its population centres in Punjab are also within striking distance; and the bulk of the armed might of the two states is maintained in ideal tank country in the plains along the border. Given its size, location and terrain, it 'evolved a strategic style (italics in original) which may be called a strategic doctrine' of 'offensive defence'.12 The doctrine envisages that in time of heightening crisis, Pakistan will not hesitate to be the first to employ a heavy use of force to gain an initial advantage. It is thought that a short, sharp, war would achieve Pakistan's military as well as political objectives. Its lack of strategic depth virtually dictates an offensive mindset. It sees war as an opportunity to bring international opinion to focus, though this involves a political risk. The doctrine hopes to achieve deterrence through raising the risk of Indian resort to war.

Pakistan went in for nuclear checkmating of India and fostering of a people's guerrilla war; experience in which it was then speedily accumulating in associating with the Central Intelligence Agency's activities with the mujahedeen. The nuclear capability would help neutralise an assumed Indian capability. The assumptions were that India has several nuclear weapons; that these are Pakistan centric; and that these could be used politically to paralyse Pakistani reaction by holding its population centres hostage in case of Indian action in Kashmir. It could also provide a cover under which the Kashmir issue could be reopened by checkmating a conventional Indian counter. It could be used to cover a bold conventional offensive in Kashmir in case the Indian leadership proved to be weak and indecisive. Of the second, guerrilla war, the idea of training and arming friendly populations in the neighbour's territory would help to 'tie him down in a hundred places'. However, Cohen assessed that resort to this would be unlikely since Pakistanis did not prefer 'Cambodiasation' that could result, as the situation in Afghanistan then clearly presaged.13 It is interesting that merely half a decade on, Pakistan was enabled to undertake this risky strategic choice by Indian mishandling in Kashmir and the departure of the Soviets from Afghanistan.

Indian strategic orientation in the period had two prongs – diplomatic and military. Among the many peace initiatives included efforts to bring about better understanding through discussion on drafts of 'No War Pact' proposal by Pakistan and a 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' proposed by India and setting up of an Indo-Pak Joint Commission. Agreements have been reached on Advance Notification of military exercises and prevention of Airspace Violations by military aircraft. A bilateral agreement on non-attack on nuclear installations proposed by India in December 1985 was signed in December 1988 and finally came into force with the exchange of lists of locations on 01 Jan 1992.

In India, on the military front was a movement away from the defensive posture of the Seventies to an offensive posture. Therefore, the resulting 'carrot and stick' approach can be characterised as a strategic doctrine of deterrence, one inducing self-restraint on the other side. DK Palit opined that "maximum force has for all intents and purposes become outlawed as a value in military strategy. This is a development that we have to adjust to in this nuclear superpower age." These developments gave rise to a fusion between diplomatic policy making and the military conduct of war. Limitations were in setting of the aim, geographical spread and in use of weaponry, resulting in a de-emphasis on decisive battle and concept of maximum force.14 Palit's thesis of restraint was promptly challenged. Reflecting an offensive spirit, the author wrote: "The strategy of restraint has little meaning when two neighbouring countries with a record of short wars, engage in combat…However, in not being drawn easily into war will remain an option of National Strategy and not an option of Military Strategy."

The Eighties witnessed a pronounced move towards the offensive. In part, this was the result of the pursuit of mechanisation first under Army Chief, General Rao and then with greater vigour, under his successor General Sundarji. Thinking on offensive operations was cast in a more aggressive mode. The usual progress of operations involving breaking the crust of defences, establishing a bridgehead and breakout were seen as operationally unacceptable. The Commandant, College of Combat, required creation of a "viable strike force capable of being speedily launched into enemy territory for the capture of objectives in considerable depth…air mobility… mechanisation of these formations…and the armour content of the division increased and greater flexibility provided by the introduction of at least one more battle group headquarters…to do justice to the requirement to move fast and strike deep." On defensive operations, holding formations were to "introduce and practice with realism the capture of enemy positions across the border on the outbreak of hostilities; such actions would go a long way in …furthering our offensive aims." He maintained that "unless this is practiced…it will be too much to expect our troops that are secure in pill boxes to get out to tackle the enemy defences…if we were to achieve any positive change in our present defensive approach we must reorientate our thinking and training on a completely offensive basis." 16 Thus, the force was being suffused with an offensive manoeuvre warfare orientation, with defensive operations seen only as a 'temporary phase'. Thinking along these lines culminated in Exercise Brasstacks, a brainchild of General Sundarji to test his mechanisation initiatives. In Rikhye's expansive, if controversial, take on the exercise the idea was to crash through into Sindh with 13 divisions.

The other aspect introduced in security calculus in the later half of the decade was the nuclear one, revealed in the famous AQ Khan interview with Kuldip Nayar. However, the highlights of the decade were Exercise Brasstacks; Indian pre-emption on the Saltoro ridgeline of Siachen in 1984; intervention in Sri Lanka through the Indian Peace Keeping Force; development of maritime mindedness and air modernisation.

Nineties

Three factors defined the Nineties for the Indian military. One was the proxy war by Pakistan; it's continuance in Punjab and being fostered in Kashmir. The second was in declining defence budgets. Last was the effect of nuclearisation that was initially covert, but requiring the military taking cognisance of the emerging security situation. These had a retarding effect on the turn to the offensive seen in the previous decade. Thus, even as the threat heightened in terms of a more aggressive Pakistan, India could not leverage its power. Pakistani acquisition of the nuclear capability rendered India's conventional superiority questionable. Therefore the Sundarji era doctrine of 'deep strike' could not be employed with impunity. This detracted from credibility of India's conventional deterrent. Resulting Pakistani adventurism culminated in the Kargil intrusion in end decade, barely a year after both states had gone nuclear in May 1998.

By end of the previous decade, Pakistan had practiced, in Exercise Zarb e Momin, a doctrine of 'offensive defence'. A pre-emptive launch of its two strike corps' pincers was envisioned.18 The exercise attempted to incorporate lessons of the Air Land Battle concept and thereby can be seen as an answer to India's preceding Exercise Brasstacks. Under nuclear cover, initially a perception was that Pakistan could make a conventional grab for Kashmir. The conventional option was not in the foreground, though its existence did ensure that Pakistan kept the provocation below Indian tolerance thresholds. Despite constrained circumstance, India's conventional capability did ensure that Pakistan was deterred from escalating its military support to levels where India would feel compelled to allowing its superior military capability to be decisively used. Pakistan therefore persisted with its 'low cost, low risk' operation that had the diplomatic advantage of 'plausible deniability'. India's response was restricted largely to counter insurgency operations, both in Punjab and Kashmir.

Conventional reticence owed in part to declining defence budgets through the period. This was compelled by India embarking of liberalisation in 1991 forced by a financial crisis, brought on in part due to military profligacy of the Eighties. However, this was a period in which Pakistan also faced constraints, primarily the withdrawal of US assistance in October 1990 when President George W Bush was not able to give necessary certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device required under the Pressler Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act. Its declining financial position reinforced its proxy war policy, in that it increased the need to keep Indian forces tied down since Pakistan was less able to cope.

The implications of liberalisation for the Army were such that a former Vice Chief had to say that the lack of funds for modernisation had automatically led to a delay in the restructuring plans of the Services. The Army's mechanisation had been held up and the overall effect was of the little modernisation undertaken was loss of the technological edge.19 The strategic option for India during the decade was deemed to be restricted to defence owing to the resource crunch. Of its two variants, dissuasion and deterrence, an analysis had it that declining defence budgets would effect deterrence capability adversely. It was thought possible to visualise even dissuasive capability as being difficult to maintain. A balanced military prefers a mix of both variants, the proportion of each depending on the war objectives sought and operational situation. In this analysis, it was assessed that India had a deterrent capability with respect to Pakistan.

The third aspect of nuclearisation resulted in doctrinal developments in the form of thinking through 'recessed deterrence'. The impetus was in the emerging threat from the nexus between China and Pakistan in both nuclear and missile spheres. This was referred to by Prime Minister Vajpayee in his letter to the US President justifying Indian tests of 1998. On 11 and 13 May 1998, India successfully completed a planned series of nuclear tests. The aim was to demonstrate a secure and effective deterrent against the use or threat of use of weapons of mass destruction against India. The decade ended with doctrinal innovation on both conventional and nuclear planes brought about by the Shakti tests and the Kargil War. A significant 'first' was the articulating of doctrine by the Army (1998) and the Air Force (1995) in this period.

The Century's First Decade

The decade began with heightened terrorism in Kashmir, a result of inability to control infiltration and momentary diversion of attention from counter insurgency during the Kargil episode. Thereafter, terrorism spread in the rest of India, spurred on by Pakistan but also due to local roots brought about by a worsening communal situation. Overt nuclearisation further cramped India's conventional might, particularly during Operation Parakram. This, along with the earlier Kargil War, served to impel doctrinal thinking through which the military instrument was to be brought back into the reckoning. Of significance to its employability however was the presence and action of the US in the vicinity in the form of the Global War on Terror. Nevertheless, by decade end, the situation has stabilised in Kashmir, even as Mumbai 26/11, the late November 2008 multiple terror attacks in Mumbai, indicated continuing vulnerability to terror.

Under the limitations of the strategic circumstance outlined above, the state is to arrive at a strategic doctrine. The Limited War thinking in the early part of the decade led to acknowledging 'the importance of strategic (politico-military) doctrine is much higher for limited war than those that are full scale, leave alone total wars. "In India's case, as lamented by Jasjit Singh, there has not been a clearly articulated strategic doctrine. The consequence is that, 'In the absence of a well established doctrine, there is a strong tendency to simply keep building on existing force levels and structures in what can only be described as an add-on strategy. Inevitably such an approach tends to be highly reactive…An overall defensive philosophy only tends to reinforce this reactive characteristic. This would be a serious handicap in limited war." 21 Since lack of articulation of strategic

doctrine operates against the building and sustaining of a national consensus on defence policies, Jasjit Singh attempts to outline a strategic doctrine. He takes India's strategic objective as building of a sustainable peace to ensure socio-economic growth. The pillars in his framework are prevention of war, removal of the threat and risk of war and reduction of the threat perception of potential adversaries. He acknowledges a "fundamental need to move from the classical paradigm of competitive security to cooperative model of interstate security. He requires "necessary precautions" amounting to deterrence to remain, but alongside efforts towards détente and strategic stability are advanced. Broadly, two alternatives emerge: defence through either a strategic defensive or strategic offensive strategy; and second, prevention of war through credible deterrence if at a minimum level. Appropriate strategies would require supporting this strategic doctrine. He tends towards the second alternative, prevention of war with deterrence being central. This would entail quantitative and qualitative superiority but one tempered by affordability. He favours air power as an instrument that furnishes both deterrence by denial and punishment, as against land power that can only deliver the former.

The diplomatic strand of grand strategy took advantage of military self-confidence emerging from an improved counter insurgency situation as also the predicament of Pakistan hemmed in by the war on terror. On the J&K issue this optimistic perspective translated into India being ready to look at options, short of redrawing the boundaries and finding a pragmatic solution to resolve the J&K issue. It was prepared to work out cooperative, consultative mechanisms so as to maximise the gains of cooperation in solving problems of social and economic development of the region. Building on the November 2003 ceasefire along the International Border, Line of Control and Actual Ground Position Line and unconditional commitment given by President Musharraf on 06 Jan 2004 not to permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner, a number of initiatives were taken to ease tensions, normalise and improve relations.

At the level of the Government, the Composite Dialogue was initiated with the resumption of Foreign Secretary level talks in June 2004. At the level of Armed Forces, a number of Confidence Building Measures were envisaged. Upgrading the link between Directors General Military Operations, new communication links at division/corps level, annual meetings of Vice Chiefs of Army Staff and exchanges between the Armed Forces related academic institutions.23 Not all have been progressed as desired; but the pace and direction of progress is itself a pressure point in the overall effort to incentivise and pressurise Pakistan into realigning its strategy of proxy war.

The military strategy in the beginning of the decade has been described as one of dissuasive defence on two legs. One leg is to deploy strong forces to man prepared defences and limit penetration. These are to be supplemented by counter attack reserves to destroy enemy lodgements. The second leg is a reactive one that has counter offensive reserves strike back with its own offensive. The dissuasion aspect is in having strong defences, while deterrence is on the certainty of a strong reply by theatre reserves.24 This articulation of military doctrine was overtaken by the implementation of the lessons from Operation Parakram by 2004. The doctrine that emerges is considerably more offensive.

The military doctrine to complement strategic doctrine exists in the form of the Indian Army Doctrine released in 2004. Presently, the term 'Limited War' occurs but once in this publication and that too, on a graphic on Spectrum of Conflict. This is problematic since the graphic in question seamlessly melds Limited War with the next stage of Total War. Further, it makes a distinction between Total War and the next higher stage of Nuclear War, indicating that wider conventional war is possible in a nuclear environment. Such doctrinal reflection is difficult to concede for two reasons: one, that in the nuclear era keeping war from becoming Total War is imperative; and two, that Nuclear War could yet erupt even during prosecution of what is originally intended as a Limited War. The nuclear overhang virtually negates the conception of Total War. Therefore, Limited War is here to stay and requires deliberateness in thinking through that only a separately articulated doctrine can ensure. While thinking through military dimensions of Limited War is undeniable, more importantly it needs to be done in keeping the nuclear doctrine in mind. Movement in one may entail a corresponding movement in the other. Therefore, the doctrinal exercise cannot be restricted to being one internal to the military. It should instead be 'military led', considering input and cross fertilisation from a wider field, not excluding in particular, the National Security Council.

There is thinking along these lines. Characteristically, it was perceptive General Sundarji who had already by the early nineties discerned that this was the direction of the future, writing, "Indian conventional operations should be modulated in scope and depth of penetration into Pakistani territory so that ingress can stop before Pakistan resorts to the use of nuclear weapons." Since Limited War would unfold under the nuclear backdrop, thinking on the implications for nuclear doctrine and the implications of nuclear doctrine need also be factored in. General Sundarji's formulation is more in line with limitation in war, including one that has for some reason gone nuclear. He wrote: "Terminate nuclear exchange at lowest possible level with a view to negotiating the best peace that is politically acceptable."

With nuclearisation, a more circumspect attitude to the use of force has developed. The predisposition of the military towards maximising employment of force has been tempered by the Limited War concept. Since wars have a dynamic of their own and if uncontrolled have a tendency towards escalation, there has to be a deliberate 'hobbling' (Bernard Brodie) of the effort in the nuclear age. This implies a move away from viewing war as a means to impose one's will, but a 'strategy of conflict' (Thomas Schelling) in which adversaries bargain through graduated military responses towards the attainment of a negotiated settlement. The difference that nuclear weapons bring is that only the latter of the two natures of war as given by Clausewitz – total defeat of the enemy or war intended to bring him to the negotiating table - remains as the only option.28 Developments in the first decade have been along these lines. However, an explicit doctrine on Limited War has not been articulated yet by the military. While the air and naval components of military power lend themselves to easier insertion, moderation and retraction in a conflict situation, the land component lacks the inherent flexibility. There is an advocacy towards building in flexibility in India's strike corps organisation through the concept of Integrated

Battle Groups in the tradition of Soviet Operational Manoeuvre Groups.29 It awaits the next iteration of the Indian Army doctrine or publication of a separate publication covering Limited War as a specialised form of war.

Conclusion

It is well acknowledged that India does not have an explicitly articulated security policy. This is so despite the existence of a National Security Council that could have undertaken the task over the past decade. However, it would be inaccurate to say that India does not have such a policy. Nevertheless, articulating the policy would be useful, such as is done periodically in other democracies and indeed by authoritarian regimes also. This would be useful for those responsible for the individual components of grand strategy, such as diplomatic, military, internal security etc. to formulate respective strategies. The gain in particular would be in the formulation of military doctrine since theory informs that this should be in conformity with strategic doctrine (orientation given by grand strategy to the state); itself dictated by the state's security policy. Absent this, the military is left without appropriate political direction in this vital exercise. Despite this handicap, the Army has, as seen in this article, proved responsive and has moved in its military doctrine towards a more offensive mindset. But further evolution would require more than mere jointness. A 'whole of government' approach is necessary for tackling conflict at any level across the spectrum – be it internal security, Limited War and unthinkable Limited Nuclear War.

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