

*Lieutenant General SL Menezes Memorial USI Essay Competition 2015**

Has Strategic Military Restraint during Most of the Last Six Decades Served India's National Interests?[£]

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Introduction

It is widely believed by sections of the strategic community and many informed as well as ordinary Indians that our political leaders are reluctant to use military force as an instrument of state policy.¹ The perception of our defensive mindset was reinforced by a seminal RAND study by George Tanham in 1992.² This cemented the conviction that we have a culture of Strategic Military Restraint; a culture considered passive, submissive, negative and hence against national interest. This essay has a 'directional hypothesis' which examines whether a conjectured point exists. The hypothesis of this essay is that what is perceived to be India's culture of strategic military restraint is a realist strategic culture which has served its interests. India has pursued an aggressive military policy when national interests have demanded the same.

The Concept of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is a concept applied to draw actionable conclusions whenever competing. This may be on the sports field, in corporate affairs or in the competition between nations. A brief definition of Strategic Culture is that it is 'a world view of the

[£]This essay competition is 'open to all across the globe'. Lieutenant General Menezes, PVSM, SC (1922-2012) was commissioned into the 4th Bombay Grenadiers on 30 May 1943 and retired as Vice Chief of Army Staff on 31 Jul 1980. He was the ex-officio Vice President of the USI Council and was also an elected Member of USI Council for many years.

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strategic community of a particular country'.³ A more specific definition is that it is 'a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise gradually over time, through a unique protracted historical process'.⁴

India's Strategic Culture of Military Restraint

An Analysis of Post-Independence Strategic Military Restraint

Restraint means to hold back from doing something. In the military field this means that while sabres may rattle at the tactical level, at the strategic level war would be initiated only after a detailed cost-benefit analysis.

The decision to go in for a UN supervised ceasefire in 1948 in J&K, the Tashkent Agreement in 1965 and the restraint displayed post the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament are among some of the examples quoted of our passivity. The current proliferation of all types of media, including social media, instantly brings criticism of policy decisions in every home for debate, and at times uninformed comments. In such an environment the media finds it beneficial to hype tactical actions to strategic heights to increase readership or Television Rating Points.

Real time publicity given to incidents without verification arouses passions. In a parliamentary democracy the hype, more often than not, provides grist to the mills of the opposition. This imposes severe pressure on a democratic government to either be restrained when it should not be restrained, or conversely whip up war hysteria. Examples are the Kandahar hijacking in Dec 1999,⁵ when weeping relatives on TV petitioning the Prime Minister, added to pressure on the Government to give-in to the demands of the hijackers.⁶ The other extreme was the reaction in Jan 2013, post the beheading of two Indian soldiers by Pakistanis at the Line of Control (LC). Reprehensive as that act was, an attack on armed soldiers deployed on the LC is not strictly a terrorist act as compared to an attack on unarmed civilians. While the media built up a war frenzy, the then Chief of Army Staff made a realist military statement that "[India] will retaliate against Pakistan's attack at a place and time of our choosing."⁷ India did retaliate in a less publicised manner, a militarily correct action. The publicised media or political warmongering and unpublicised military reaction, create

an impression that we are 'soft' and shy away from 'hard' actions. This however, is disproved by the facts given below :-

- (a) In 1947-48 India embarked upon militarily consolidating the Country by taking proactive actions in Hyderabad and Junagarh even while it was engaged in a near total war with Pakistan in Kashmir and struggling with the challenges of Partition. The war in Kashmir was pursued as aggressively as possible by a fledgling Government whose strategic military choices were prone to interference by the Governor General Lord Mountbatten and British commanders on both sides.⁸
- (b) In 1961, India liberated Goa, Daman and Diu by military force in the face of strong condemnation from the complete western world and its professed stand of not using military force to settle disputes.⁹
- (c) In 1962, India did not hesitate to assert McMahon Line as the border and followed the 'forward policy' in Ladakh and NEFA. Although, this was due to 'criminally faulty intelligence inputs' which led to an incorrect assessment that it would not be challenged by the Chinese People's Liberation Army;¹⁰ and is not relevant to the current argument.
- (d) In 1965, the subdued Indian reaction in the Rann of Kutch was more a result of the geographical difficulty for India to sustain operations there.¹¹ This was taken by Pakistan as a sign of Indian timidity which emboldened it to launch Operation *Gibraltar* in Kashmir. India's proactive strategy was evident in her readiness to strike back across the International Border (IB) towards Lahore and Sialkot.
- (e) The 1971 War was a classic case of display of military restraint to gain favourable world opinion and then launch an orchestrated counter offensive campaign. This led to India's first strategic victory.
- (f) The 1987 Sumdorong Chu incident was countered with aggressive posturing by India. The result was that India and China restarted their dialogue which led to the 1993 Agreement to ensure peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

(g) The 1974 and 1998 Nuclear tests can in no way be labelled as a strategy of military restraint.

(h) The decision in 1984 to preempt and occupy the Siachen Glacier and being prepared for a protracted conflict in an exceedingly difficult terrain was not strategic restraint.

(i) The 1999 restraint in not striking across the LC in Kargil was a considered strategic decision which enabled India to use sizable military and air power to achieve its objectives without enlarging the conflict.

(j) The build-up and calibrated use of force to combat insurgencies in Nagaland, Mizoram, Punjab and Kashmir have been strong and adequate to restore the situation. Writing about the State's approach in combating insurgencies the prominent journalist Shekhar Gupta states "[c]ontrary to what is sometimes suggested, India is by no means a soft state. In fact when it comes to self-preservation, it is amongst the most brutal anywhere, and that doesn't change particularly with the party in power".¹²

Operation Parakram – Restraint Exemplified

The course of the 2001 Operation Parakram in the aftermath of the attack on the Indian Parliament was widely commented upon as being '*effete*' (emphasis added) by the hawks within our Country. Restrain means to hold back someone who wants to push forward. Restraint by definition at the strategic level can therefore be imposed only by the highest authority in any system of governance. Military analysts have written about at least two windows that were available during the period of the operation when we could have gone to war.¹³ However Mr Jaswant Singh, the then External Affairs Minister has stated that "our aims [were to] defeat cross border infiltration/terrorism *without conflict*; to contain the national mood of 'teach Pakistan a Lesson': and in the event of war, to destroy and degrade Pakistan's war fighting capabilities".¹⁴ What is unsaid is that while the morale was high and commanders in the field were eager to go in¹⁵, the political leadership felt that the costs and risks of going to war outweighed the gains accruing from it. Since Jaswant Singh had been Defence Minister, in addition to his own ministry for seven months prior to the Parliament attack, his counsel would have been sought and valued.

The Realism Construct

Para 1.2 of India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine released on 17 Aug, 1999 states that 'India's primary objective is to achieve economic, political, social, scientific and technological development within a peaceful and democratic framework'.¹⁶ The primacy of this view has been broadly subscribed to by all political parties. In practice, if not in theory, the philosophy is that "the balance of resource allocation between defence and development [has] to favour the latter...".¹⁷ If that be so then ostensibly our coercive diplomacy in Operation Prakaram was guided by a realist view that India should follow a policy of strategic restraint. War would have derailed the prosperity coming in with liberalisation post 1991, and impacted our poverty alleviation efforts.

Factors Shaping Indian Strategic Culture

The Impact of History and Geography on Strategic Culture

History and geography are closely interwoven. The difference between them is the angle from which they view the world. History views it from the perspective of time and geography from the perspective of space¹⁸. As would be true for any other country, the development of Indian strategic culture has its roots in its military geography and military history. Geography gave us an insular look and a perception of being protected. For ages the combination of the Hindu Kush, the five large rivers which merge to form the Indus, and the Thar Desert, created multiple obstacles to invaders coming to India from the North and North West. A combination of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean created even more formidable bastions in the other cardinal directions. The Aryans were nomads who found space to come in over a prolonged period of almost 500 years from 1500 to 1000 BCE¹⁹ as the largely agricultural Indus valley civilisation declined. Thus the first known invader to carry out a military crossing of the Western obstacle belt was Alexander around 326 BCE. He too could not proceed beyond the Jhelum (*Hydaspes*).

Consequently, a perception took root that the mountains and the rivers provide an impregnable shield; this created a strategic culture of complacency. Kings in the path of an invader preferred to pay tribute and negotiate if it served their interest. They could not be faulted as there was no concept of one nation, called India.

One single sub-continental country only came about during the time of Chandragupta Maurya and his successors who expanded the kingdom of Magadha over most of the Indian Subcontinent.

Partition of India in 1947 took away the obstacles to the Indian heartland from the West. For decades thereafter the core trait of our strategic culture has been obsession with the Pakistani threat. The 1962 War, and unimaginable improvement in transport infrastructure in the Tibetan region in recent years, made possible by economic and military rise of China, has eroded the concept of a Himalayan shield. Because of such reasons the Indian-born American security studies expert Rodney Jones writes, 'it is foreseeable that some of the core traits of [India's strategic culture] may be subject to modification in the coming decades'.²⁰

Strategic Restraint and Form of Government

The perception of our restrained strategic decision-making is often compared to the speedier and bolder decision making of our two neighbouring opponents. China has always been a one-party totalitarian/authoritarian state. Pakistan has been either a military dictatorship or an *ersatz* multi-party democracy as real power resides with a single institution, the Pakistan Army. In a true democracy, "democratic leaders, compared to [dictators or authoritarian leaders], are more likely to lose political office if they fight a losing war".²¹ This makes their decision making cautious because after the war they have to answer to the people for the outcome. Strategic restraint is, therefore, a hallmark of a democracy wherein 'publicity' and 'majority decision making' have been alluded to as 'vices' by the acclaimed International Relations realist Hans Morgenthau.²²

Consequently, democracies will go to war only when they are confident that they could win.²³ The 1971 War was initiated only when India was well and truly prepared to win. Democracies can be pragmatic and responsive in real time only when the risk factor is low and success factor is high. The military will have its contingency plans in place but in a democracy, strategic decisions are made by the political leadership. The swift response to attack the camps of the northeast rebels in Myanmar on 09 Jun 2015 was ultimately a political decision. This was confirmed by the Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, who told the media "It was a much-

needed decision that was taken by the Prime Minister".²⁴ Obviously, it must have been taken after weighing the military certainty of success and the domestic and international dividends.

Religion and Strategic Culture of Restraint

Many writers endorse the theory that our religion and culture makes us peace-loving and passive. They talk of distinctive elements of Hinduism which make Hindu psyche 'accommodating and not indulg[ing] in strong feelings of hatred, and incapable of barbarity in war'.²⁵ This essay opines that while all religions are pacifist, religions also support a 'just' war to serve the interests of its adherents. All religions have been pacifist and aggressive at various points of time. The current fundamentalist image of Islam responsible for the belief that Islam and pacifism are incompatible²⁶ emerged in the 1970's, though its roots are in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire post World War II.²⁷ The Christians have had the Crusades, the Inquisition and an ultimate pacifist in Christ who forgave his killers. The Buddhists traditionally believed to be pacifist have contributed to an explosive amalgam with Shintoism which led to the aggressive Samurai spirit of Japan²⁸. The Srilankan Buddhists engaged in a war with the most dreaded terrorist organisation at a point of time, the LTTE, which was made up of the traditionally pacifist Tamil Hindu, and won it after what was one of the most vicious wars of all times. All these examples validate the point that a religious denomination does not determine the aggressiveness or pacifism of a nation. Aggression in religions as in any other body is in effect a competition for getting the best deal for your 'camp,' or a sacred duty for a just cause.²⁹ The latter is evident in a study of the epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which have had a great impact on our culture.

Strategic Restraint and Geopolitical Realities

It is a geopolitical reality that we are restrained by our disputed, un-demarcated and unresolved borders with two militarily strong and nuclear weapon armed colluding states – China and Pakistan. Internal threats and secessionist movements in our border states have also impacted on national cohesiveness. The financial burden of maintaining a large military and also large Central Armed Police Forces while we are a developing nation is a restraint on our aspirations.

A landmark which defines the schism in the strategic culture debate was the Kargil war of 1999. Were we restrained or were we aggressive? Though much criticised at that time, the Indian decision to limit all physical move including the Air Force to the Indian side of the LC was an incisive insight into geopolitical reality. It helped in gaining diplomatic support worldwide and reinforced the international view about the importance of the principle of inviolability of the LC. What was viewed within India as unnecessary restraint became a strategic strength. It highlighted Pakistan's complicity and India's maturity. It led to Pakistan's closest ally and all weather friend, China, to repeatedly emphasise to the Pakistanis that Beijing would not support it to ensure the success of this audacious but unprincipled venture which could have much wider ramifications for the security of the world.³⁰

Strategic Aggressiveness and Secularism

India chose to be a secular country and not a Hindu *Rashtra*. Similarly, at inception Pakistan too believed it could be a secular country. However, the very basis of its being, i.e. a homeland for the Muslims of India was at cross purposes with this idea. It is, therefore, no surprise that Pakistan is a de facto Sunni theocratic state with repeated instances of intolerance of not only other religions but also other strains of Islam. When a secular and theocratic state are in conflict the secular state will be sensitive to its citizens who belong to the religion of the theocratic state. In such a case, decisions with restraint where minority sentiments are involved become a '*sine quo non*'. Our decision to avoid the US requests to join the Coalition in Iraq in 2003 was supported by both the NDA and the UPA, though powerful players were inclined to join the Coalition to gain the US favour and other benefits.³¹ Amongst many other reasons for this, an important one could be the adverse fallout on our secular fabric.

If India has been able to maintain its secular and democratic complexion it is thanks to the vision of its founding fathers and their culture of strategic restraint. It is unlikely that a fundamentalist Hindu India would have been able to evolve as a responsible and respected member of the world community without such a culture. Strategic restraint is the trait of a mature country which recognises national priorities and acts in the interest of its people.

Nuclearisation and Strategic Restraint

The overt nuclearisation of India and Pakistan post 1998 has made Indian leaders wary of the escalatory risk of sending the Army across the borders. This was the case in Operation Prakaram when the mobilisation of 500,000 troops on the Indo-Pak Border was used as coercive diplomacy which achieved questionable results rather than an all-out war. 'When confronted with a choice of all or nothing, [Vajpayee's Government] decided to exercise restraint'.³² Such restraint is the hallmark of a mature nuclear armed state.

Conclusion

Bridging the Politico-Military Divide in Strategic Thinking

It is a universal phenomenon that the military will always strive to remain as modern and large as possible to be confident of guaranteeing the security of the nation. The political establishment will have a different view of threats, especially in a developing democracy where priorities of nation building have primacy. The disconnect may lie in their respective logic. The military logic being that hard strength keeps enemies at bay enabling peace and economic growth while the political logic is that peace and economic growth build strength; the strength being a mix of hard and soft power. While the military elite argue that enemies respect visible strength, the political elite who deal with poverty more intimately have a more realist view of the policy of strategic restraint. The disconnect in the thinking of the politico-diplomatic and military elites while dealing with strategic issues can be synchronised only if the military leadership is included in the highest echelons of political decision making both in the defence and relevant external affairs realms. Often the military is kept in the dark about strategic issues; consequently, they see threats where the politicians do not.

As to the question : does India need to change its mindset and be unrestrained while dealing with strategic issues during the coming decades? The answer is that we still have a long way to go before we can realise the dream of being a developed as well as a fully integrated and consolidated Country. The United States which is an integrated country did not reach that stage until about 130 years after its Independence. We have just crossed the half

way mark in a Country with a far greater diversity of population and a chequered history. Until we complete the development and integration of our Country, a policy of Strategic Restraint would serve us better.

The Reality of a Globalised World

To maintain world peace, the principles of just war have been codified in a number of treaties. As per the International Court of Justice, even self defence has been qualified to prevent war. A pre-emptive attack cannot be launched just on the basis of belligerent posturing or words. Attacks on one's nationals abroad do not justify retaliation; self defence does not allow reprisals against enemy territory and lastly any force that is used in self defence must be necessary and proportional to the armed attack.³³

In a globalised world a nuclear war will adversely impact others, not because of a direct threat but because of the high likelihood of colossal collateral damage. India and its principal adversaries are all armed with nuclear weapons. This enforces a great restraint on war for a mature state like India because a nuclear war is obviously in the category of 'thinking the unthinkable'. As stated earlier, during the Kargil War, China refused to support its 'all weather friend', Pakistan. During Operation Prakaram and post Mumbai terror attacks it despatched Prime Minister Zhu Rongji and the Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei to India and Pakistan to restrain the two nuclear weapon armed antagonists³⁴. These are indicators that even China with which we have a seemingly intractable border dispute, values neighbourhood stability for its economic development.³⁵ China too, in keeping with the Confucius philosophy, by and large, values restraint.

A Culture of Military Restraint has Served National Interests

We finally come back to the question asked – Has strategic military restraint during most of the last six decades served India's national interests? This essay concludes that it has. The security of a country is not weighed only in terms of ability to deter or defeat an external aggressor. It is also measured by the ability to fight enemies such as hunger, poverty and disease. The fatalities caused by these enemies far surpass those that occur in wars.³⁶ Whatever is the rhetoric while electioneering, all Indian governments once elected show a clear grasp of reality in regarding war as the option

of last resort.³⁷ A political consensus appears to exist that unless there is an existential threat or occupation of sovereign Indian territory an all-out conventional war will not be commensurate to the cost. India too without stating it, in the manner Deng Xiaoping did, would “bide it's time”. This is in consonance with the ‘[.....] traditionally realist affluence theory that wealth and military power go hand in hand’.³⁸ India is not an expansionist country with imperial ambitions. It would want to grow economically to be able to uplift its people. Economic growth is a more preferable route as compared to enhanced military capability and stunted growth. Our policy of strategic military restraint will serve our interests better and will need to be discarded only in the face of external existential threats. Presently, the threats that exist do not justify the abandonment of the policy of strategic military restraint.

Endnotes

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