

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

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Introduction

India's political, military and nuclear strategies can be spelt out in two words – "Strategic Restraint". The policy has generally been followed by all the Indian governments when in crises and armed conflicts. Since the 1947-48 Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) War, India's unwise and hasty reference of the invasion to the United Nations (UN) resulted in prolonged confrontation with Pakistan which continues to remain unresolved until today. Thereafter, since 1989, India's failure to deal decisively with the 'proxy war' sponsored by Pakistan in J&K; and later, the terrorist attacks on Mumbai and the Indian Parliament, a case may be made that the policy of "Strategic Restraint" has not served India's national interest. Although this policy has served well on many occasions, it has also led to India falling short of achieving results commensurate to its size, resources, population, technological and military capabilities, and soft power. Logically, a strong and stable India should have deterred its enemies from covert actions within its borders due to its resilient economy, military prowess and nuclear power status.

Definition

While "strategic restraint" is an accepted term in the lexicon of international relations, few theorists bother to define it. Jeffrey W Meiser in his 2015 work, "*Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898-1894*" defines strategic restraint in the light of his view of grand strategy as "the long-term pattern of behaviour of a nation-state".¹ To Meiser, grand strategy represents the

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demonstrated outcome of events that have occurred and not as “a long-term plan political leaders and their advisers develop to guide foreign policy”. In his view, the consideration whether the strategy was intended or unplanned is inconsequential. He goes on to say “strategic restraint is restraint at the strategic level and not necessarily the result of a well-thought plan”.²

However, cases of “strategic restraint” need to be clearly differentiated from those of “strategic coercion” where an external agency causes a nation to follow a path not of its choosing by diplomatic, economic or military force, which may be explicit or implicit.³

The Indian Experience

Over the last 68 years, “strategic constraint”, with a few exceptions, has been the predominant theme of India’s foreign policy. The first instance of its application manifested in the 1947- 48 conflict in J&K. By the end of 1948, the Indian Army offensive was on the ascendant : after eliminating imminent threat to the Valley, liberating Ladakh and Kargil and relieving Poonch; the Indian Army stopped the Pakistani offensive on all the fronts. Had the momentum of the counter offensive been permitted to continue, a conclusive end-state could have been obtained. It would have either ended in the liberation of the entire J&K state, including Gilgit and Baltistan (Northern Territories), and a defendable border, or to a more politically advantageous position. The operations were halted prematurely when an idealistic Pandit Nehru referred the dispute to the nascent United Nations for arbitration.⁴

Nehru’s faith in Indo-Chinese friendship led to India surrendering its inherited rights and assets (from the British Indian Government on gaining Independence in August 1947) in Tibet to China; and then in October 1950, to unopposed Chinese invasion of *de facto* independent Tibet, resulting in the incorporation of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China. Later, the misreading of China’s ‘dialectic of strategic overtures’ culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict.

Earlier, during the protracted freedom struggle against the British Rule, the Indian political leaders had developed a ‘feeling of antipathy’ towards the British Indian Armed Forces leading to a ‘sense of distrust’ on advice by the Independent India’s military

leaders.⁵ The lack of trust in military advice and Nehru's unwavering faith in Defence Minister Krishna Menon's handling of military affairs manifested in discord with the military in general and General Thimayya in particular which contributed to the country's strategic establishment turning a 'blind eye' to ground realities and also ignoring 'numerous warnings about Chinese intentions'.

The degradation of military needs after Independence, by Nehru and Krishna Menon, resulted in the weakening of the Indian Armed Forces and subsequent operational setbacks in the 1962 war with China.⁶ A militarily weak India was forced to accept China's unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal from the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) on the culmination of the conflict - leaving a large part of Aksai Chin in Chinese hands. An atmosphere of fear amongst the political leadership and international pressure from the Americans led to the decision not to use the technologically superior Indian Air Force which could have helped degrade the Chinese onslaught and restore the situation.⁷

The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War saw a new leadership at the helm. There was conflict in all sectors of the Western front, from Kutch to Kargil; while the Eastern front, which West Pakistan had left undefended, was not activated by India. Indian restraint from what would have been an easy military conquest of erstwhile East Pakistan is thought to have arisen from the Chinese threats to reactivate the disputed India-China border, in which case, if true, it would be a successful case of strategic coercion.⁸ The 1965 War concluded as a stalemate, with India carrying top honours.⁹ As per the Tashkent Agreement, which cost India in terms of *realpolitik*, in return for giving up International arbitration for the Kashmir dispute, India had to give up key strategic posts that it had captured, notably Haji Pir. This is a notable example of strategic restraint where the Indian State agreed to give up tangible assets for an empty assurance which was not honoured.¹⁰

Chinese factor as demonstrated in the 1965 War influenced Manekshaw's insistence on a winter war, when the snowbound Himalayan passes precluded any chance of Chinese interference in the 1971 War.¹¹ The excellent strategic planning and conduct of operations resulted in the surrender of Pakistan Army in East Pakistan in just 14 days. However, this military intervention was not a case of India's exercising strategic restraint; as much as, it

was an outcome of economic compulsions with 10 million refugees bleeding India's economy.¹²

The signing of the 1972 Shimla Agreement by India and Pakistan was followed by the swapping of prisoners of war (PW). India repatriated over 90,000 Pakistani PW after the Agreement. The reason for India not extracting concessions on Kashmir was based on the reasoning that the fragile democracy in Pakistan would crumble if the accord was perceived as being overly harsh by Pakistanis; Bhutto would be accused of losing Kashmir in addition to East Pakistan.¹³ This move was opposed by some at that point of time,¹⁴ and is criticised even today.¹⁵ However, Pakistani agreement, that the issue of Kashmir would thenceforth be resolved bilaterally without third-party intervention, has served India well, enabling it to prevent effective mobilisation of international intervention by Pakistan.

The Kargil War in 1999 was initiated by Pakistan, believing that an Indian conventional response to a *coup-de-force* could be deterred by nuclear posturing. While India was strategically deterred by nuclear considerations from resorting to full scale conventional war along its Western border,¹⁶ India had the option of limited war, limited in geographic scope to the Line of Control (LC) sector of J&K. However, India's decision to respond militarily within self-imposed bounds of restricting operations to Kargil and Ladakh sectors and on own side of the LC only, shaped international perception and enhanced India's status as a responsible nuclear power.¹⁷

In late 1986, an aggressive Indian strategic exercise meant to test Indian military mobilisation capabilities, Exercise 'Brasstacs', was interpreted by Pakistan as a credible conventional threat and resulted in the mobilisation of its armed forces in turn. While the Indians had no aggressive agenda, the international community feared that imminent hostilities could lead to a nuclear flare-up. This led to diplomatic activity and de-escalation of the crisis. Some international scholars have speculated that threat of nuclear escalation was a credible reason for Indian strategic restraint.¹⁸

A similar scenario emerged in 1989, when a proxy war was launched in J&K with the active support of Pakistan. India responded with a vigorous counter-insurgency campaign that is

ongoing to this day. The issue of whether India's choice not to open cross-border hostilities was strategic restraint or whether it was deterred by Pakistani nuclear threats has been debated widely in the strategic community.¹⁹ Similar claims have been made about virtually every crisis situation involving India and Pakistan since exercise '*Brasstacks*'.²⁰

Restraint in Indian Nuclear Policy

India's nuclear programme began immediately after Independence under the stewardship of Homi Jehangir Bhabha. Nehru, a passionate advocate of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and nuclear disarmament, would not allow the development of nuclear weapons technology. Nevertheless, fearing the failure of nuclear disarmament, he refused to foreclose India's nuclear options.²¹

Pacifist views on nuclear energy were shared by influential Indian leaders and technocrats (notably Shastri, Rajiv Gandhi and Vikram Sarabhai, the head of the Atomic Energy Commission) leading to a long gap between the Chinese and Indian nuclear tests, and between India's first nuclear test and development of nuclear weapons.²²

Post-1962, India sought protection under a nuclear umbrella from the West and the USSR but was refused. Indian hopes in the establishment of a global disarmament regime were dashed with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty being negotiated that sought to perpetuate the primacy of the established nuclear weapon nations while denying the same to others.²³

In 1966, the decision to carry out a nuclear test was taken but it fell by the wayside due to the unfortunate deaths of both Shastri and Bhabha. Later, Indira Gandhi revived the project resulting in the 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion". However, due to its pacifist foreign policy India did not declare itself a nuclear weapons state. Eventually, 25 years passed before India broke its nuclear restraint in 1998.²⁴

In 1998, domestic compulsions of a weak coalition government, the growing asymmetric equation vis-à-vis China and an adverse international environment led to the nuclear tests by India. By going nuclear, India resolved its ambiguous status which saw it coming under pressure to sign restrictive agreements such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Comprehensive Test Ban

Treaty amongst others. India, while remaining outside these regimes, agreed to a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing and non-proliferation.²⁵

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine. India's nuclear policy remained ambiguous until the release of the Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict.²⁶ The core tenets of India's nuclear stance were spelt out in the draft doctrine as follows :-²⁷

“India shall pursue a doctrine of credible minimum nuclear deterrence. In this policy of “retaliation only”, the survivability of our arsenal is critical;

India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail;

India will not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against States which do not possess nuclear weapons, or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers.”

These tenets reflect the world-view of two of India's most influential thinkers on nuclear matters – General K Sundarji, principal author of DND and K Subrahmanyam, convener of the NSAB – that nuclear weapons are primarily meant for political and strategic deterrence, and not for use in military contexts.²⁸ Indian nuclear doctrine has been described by an American commentator as “fundamentally conservative ... ”.²⁹

The language and tone of the doctrine – “no first use” (NFU), “no use against non-nuclear powers” and “minimal credible deterrence” – speak throughout of restraint. There are no threats against any specified adversary, only the policy about India's posture.

These tenets were reiterated in India's official Nuclear Doctrine released in 2003.³⁰ However, certain aspects have been diluted; namely, the threat of “punitive damage causing unacceptable damage” has been changed to “massive retaliation”, and whether a chemical or biological attack by a non-nuclear state would invite nuclear response.³¹

The concept of NFU has repeatedly been questioned by experts on strategic affairs,³² the principal objection being that it is axiomatic to NFU that India absorb an enemy first strike which could leave India without adequate retaliatory assets. India would

then be forced to retaliate against counter-value targets, which again exposes India's population centres to retaliatory nuclear strikes. Numerous solutions have been proposed, which range from restoration of the "punitive damage" concept into the doctrine to changing India's stance from NFU to "strategic ambiguity".³³

The Debate: Has Strategic Restraint Served India?

Strategic restraint has definitely given pay-offs to India from time to time. It has been an important reason why India has been perceived as a responsible and mature democracy. India flaunts its record of restraint in world affairs when making claims for permanent membership of the Security Council in the United Nations. India's impeccable non-proliferation record facilitated the coming about of the Indo-US nuclear deal.

India's moderate nuclear policy has led to the development of a credible nuclear deterrent force. The modest pile of warheads is now served by the classic triad of delivery weapons. India is now recognised as a nuclear power and a responsible one at that. However, in recent times, the Indian nuclear doctrine and the adequacy of India's deterrent has been questioned. India's development of nuclear weapons (1988) and testing came far too late; by that time India had fought four wars, with a fifth one to occur (1999) within a year's time. India's nuclearisation has led to that of Pakistan and has not deterred it from supporting insurgency, secessionism and terror in Indian territory.

Strategic restraint in Indian policy has arisen more from the default options of a non-assertive Indian state rather than as a conscious policy choice. Indian passiveness appears to be rooted in the non-violent nature of its struggle for Independence, and in the belief systems of its apex leaders, Nehru and Gandhi.³⁴ India has often been reluctant to pursue self-interest in its policy, preferring ideological lines of action instead. Other causes for strategic restraint have been India's weak economic status, domestic compulsions, international pressure and last but not least, a lack of a strategic culture in its decision making apparatus.³⁵

The answer to the question "Has strategic restraint served us well?" is "Yes, most of the time". This policy has been in consonance with India's cultural and spiritual identity. It has helped keep India's populace 'fed' during the fifties and sixties, as well as to create a conducive environment for economic progress and

development of society. India's enviable position of strength in South Asia today could arguably be attributed to its restrained foreign policy. However, it has also led to missed opportunities.

Indian support to Tibet would have been a brake on Chinese expansionism and might have led to an equitable dialectic with the People's Republic of China. Timely development and testing of nuclear weapons would have led to India's inclusion in the Security Council where the primary qualification for its membership was being recognised as a nuclear power. Our Nation's position would have been at the helm of affairs on the international stage and not that of a supplicant as has been the case. It may be hypothesised that strategic restraint has been at the cost of India's chances of becoming a great power.

The Cure: A Robust and Integrated Strategic Apparatus

A major cause for India's choice of a prudent path has been the inability of the Indian State to develop instruments for integrating strategy with its policy apparatus. While numerous reasons have been advocated for the lack of strategic direction in the Indian policy-making, the lack of its existence is undisputed – so much so that Cohen and Dasgupta titled their scholarly thesis on Indian defence procurement of 2010 as *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernisation*.³⁶

Even its most assertive actions; namely, the liberation of Bangladesh and the *Shakti* nuclear explosion of 1998, arose more as a reaction to the prevalent international environment and domestic compulsions than as an outcome of a bold and assertive strategy for national security.³⁷ In that sense, the question of whether India should continue on its path of strategic restraint is subsumed by a broader question: "Should India continue with this lack of strategic direction in Indian policy?"

Any path in foreign policy charted by a Government would have its pluses and minuses – including the path of strategic restraint. However, as times change, so must policies to suit the times. This change must come from reasoned and informed decision-making, not as a *fait accompli*, and most definitely not as the result of coercion.

The architects of past and present apparatus for strategic decision-making in the Government of India have gone overboard

in emphasising civilian control over strategic decision-making to such an extent that it relegates military commanders to the third level and completely excludes a single point for military advice. This has led to military leaders becoming frustrated over their inability to draw the attention of civilian decision-makers on issues of paramount military concern, at times, even during conflicts.³⁸

The reforms after the 1962 War were ineffective due to their incomplete nature and lack of political will to implement the necessary reforms. Similarly, post-Kargil, the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was established without a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS); however, the effect was negligible as the IDS was set up as 'an attached office'; there is nothing integrated in Indian defence planning and policy making other than the terminology.³⁹

The single biggest measure for a successful strategic direction to Indian policy is predicated on the Government's ability to create such a consultative mechanism. Even if such a structure were created, there would be the need for a sea change in relations between the military establishment and the civilian bureaucracy. However, keeping the current political scenario in mind, it is not certain whether this will be forthcoming in the future.

In the absence of such a strategic decision-support mechanism and better coordination between the civil and military echelons of the Indian State, our strategic policy appears doomed to carry on as it has in the past – as a passive responder to events, rather than as a bold and confident assertion of a Nation in its prime.

Conclusion

Strategic Restraint has served India fairly well but the application of this policy option, for reasons other than as a result of a deliberate and well- planned strategy, has also led to its being the primary obstacle to India realising its full potential and taking its rightful place amongst the community of nations. To conclude, India's leaders would be wise to heed the opening sentence of Sun Tzu's "The Art of War", which says :

"The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected."

Endnotes

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