

‘Cold Start’ – The Cat is Out of the Bag

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Preamble

After years of denial, despite sufficient evidence to the contrary, India finally seems to be moving towards a formal embrace of the Cold Start Doctrine. The new Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat has acknowledged the existence of this provocative war fighting doctrine and has urged his institution to gear up for its implementation. Western media, think tank wizards, academic scholars and security analysts had been lecturing Pakistan that its concerns about the Cold Start are misplaced because it exists more in Pakistani fantasies than in reality and that it had never been adopted officially either by the Indian military or the Indian government. The Manmohan government had indeed studiously avoided discussing this doctrine publicly though it let the Indian military war game it year after year starting in 2004. It is yet not clear what has really motivated General Rawat to open this can of worms early in his tenure. It seems that taking a cue from the belligerent stance of the BJP government towards Pakistan and a fire-breathing Defense Minister like Manohar Parrikar, the general might have seen a propitious opportunity to gain a formal government approval for Cold Start and with it a bigger chunk of resources. At the same time Rawat is also threatening Pakistan with surgical strikes though it is not part of the Cold Start menu.

As Barry Posen points out: “Historically, offensive military strategies have helped military organizations evade civilian control. In time of war the pursuit of offensive actions without seeking civilian concurrence, or in actual violation of civilian instructions, has been common.”¹... One cannot say definitively that the thinking behind Cold Start strategy has been influenced

¹ Barry R. Posen, ‘Inadvertent Escalation’, Cornell University Press, 1991, pp.19.

by the desire of the Indian military to somehow loosen the rather tight civilian control and gain a greater room for maneuver for themselves but this motive can also not be completely ruled out. In recent times Indian military has displayed a greater degree of assertiveness by publicly expressing strong differences of opinion with the government policy positions and have forced changes in the policies of the political leadership.

In the aftermath of the nuclear tests in May 1998 Pakistan had made it amply clear that it intends to employ its nuclear capability to deter 'all forms of aggression', which essentially means that it wants to deter not only India's nuclear threat but any conventional threat emanating from it as well. It was hoped that nuclearisation would bring about a stable strategic environment in South Asia. The outbreak of a military conflict in the Kargil region of Kashmir in early 1999 forced the Indian security managers to start looking for innovative ways of using their edge in conventional military capabilities to deter any further 'adventurism' by Pakistan. Consequently, General V. P. Malik – then Indian Army Chief and Defense Minister George Fernandez started propounding a limited war doctrine. General Malik set the tone by declaring that in the spectrum between the sub-conventional conflict and nuclear war there is a space for a limited conventional war.²

Indians have since been trying to delineate that space and to find ways and means to exploit it. By propounding the limited war doctrine the Indian leadership has been trying to attain the twin objectives of justifying and rationalizing the need to maintain a large conventional military force on the one hand and sending a clear message to Pakistan on the other that nuclearization of South

² V.P. Malik, 'Strategic Stability in South Asia', Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey California, June 29-July 1, 2004. ccc@nps.edu.

Asia has not completely foreclosed India's options to resort to the use of force. However, when the crunch came in 2001-02 despite all the rhetoric about limited war, hot pursuit operations and salami slicing tactics, India found itself unable to implement that strategy. One of the main reasons for this failure to implement the limited war doctrine was the loss of strategic surprise due to the fairly long time taken to complete the mobilization of its strike forces. By the time Indian mobilization was actualized Pakistan had completed its counter mobilization and Pakistani forces were ready and waiting to deal with any Indian offensive.

The frustrating experience of almost a year-long mobilization of forces which had to be demobilized without any action, proved to be a catalyst for further debate and exploration of new ideas within the Indian military. The outcome was the introduction in early 2004 of India's 'Cold Start Strategy' which basically aims at reducing the mobilization time of India's strike formations. Initially, it was thought that by disaggregating the cumbersome strike corps into more handy Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs), positioning these forces closer to the international border and gaining a head start by enhancing the ability of the defensive formations now termed as the 'Pivot Corps' to undertake limited offensive operations Pakistan's defensive forces would be denied any reaction time. The initial gains made by the pivot corps will then be exploited by the rapidly moving IBGs. The operations by the IBGs were envisaged to be closely supported by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and where possible Indian Navy would also be integrated. The objectives assigned to the IBGs would be deliberately kept shallow in order to avoid crossing Pakistan's nuclear red lines.

It may, however, be pertinent to have a very brief overview of the concept of limited war before undertaking a detailed analysis of the Cold Start Strategy and possible Pakistani responses to meet the challenges posed by the new concept.

What is Limited War?

Limited war can be divided into three broad categories such as 'Limited Conventional War', 'Limited Conventional War under a Nuclear Umbrella' and finally 'Limited Nuclear War'. All of these have different connotations, however, for the purpose of this paper and in the context of Cold Start Strategy the most relevant category is limited war under the shadow of nuclear weapons. Professor John Garnett³ has laid down four determinants of limited war as under:-

- First, the term limited war can be used to describe wars, which are limited geographically to a confined area such as the Korean War.
- Second usage of the term is to characterize wars fought for limited objectives. For example, Egyptian attack across the Suez canal in 1973.
- Third, it is used to describe wars fought with limited means. However, the caveat is that a war which is limited because neither of the belligerents has the capacity to make it a total war cannot be termed as a limited war.
- Fourth, it is used to describe wars in which restraint is exercised in targeting. For example, the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971.

Robin Brown has described the logic of limited war in a nuclear environment stating that, "If nuclear weapons had made war too devastating to be an instrument of policy though, how could the challenge of war be met? The objective of limited war was to meet this challenge, to find ways in which force could be used to meet aggression without threatening global devastation."⁴ The

³ John Garnett, 'Contemporary Strategy Vol-1', London, Croom Helm, 1987, pp.191.

⁴ Robin Brown, 'Limited War', in Colin McInnes & G.D. Sheffield, eds., 'Warfare in the Twentieth Century', London, Unwin Hyman, 1988, pp.164.

preceding statement by Robin Brown sums up the dilemma faced by the Indian military which finds itself in a bind, in the aftermath of nuclearization of the two South Asian neighbors, and is trying to break free of the strategic strait jacket through innovative doctrinal thinking.

Commenting on Thomas Schelling’s advocacy of a ‘strategy of coercive diplomacy’ Brown says that the idea of coercive diplomacy was attractive for the decision makers in view of the fact that as shown by the events in Korea leading up to MacArthur’s dismissal, military forces had an inherent tendency to cause unintended escalation. Therefore, carefully calibrated pressure, signaling and tight control afforded by coercive diplomacy was an ideal way to manage conflict in the nuclear age. He further explains that, “Limited War theory had been built on the assumption that the opponent was cautious and value maximizing, not a fanatically determined individual who will battle on until the weapons are dashed from his hands.”⁵

This could also explain the management of the 2001-02 Crisis by the Indian political leadership and removal from command of a corps commander who had overstepped his brief. The Cold Start doctrine raised the question whether the Indian political leaders would be willing to cede control to the military commanders in the field and sit back to manage the consequences of any intended or unintended escalation resulting from the offensive actions undertaken by some overenthusiastic field commander. In the past the Indian leaders were reluctant to do so, however, the Modi government appears to have no such inhibitions and is more prone to risk taking, brinkmanship and bellicosity especially in its dealings with Pakistan.

In essence the whole concept of limited war is built around two cardinal principles namely the ‘minimum necessary’ and ‘the

⁵ *ibid*, pp.175.

maximum feasible'. According to Henry Kissinger with modern weapons, a limited war becomes an act of policy, not of necessity. He further states that, between the treaty of Westphalia and the French Revolution and between the Congress of Vienna and the outbreak of the First World War, wars were limited because of the existence of political framework, which led to a general acceptance of a policy of limited risks.⁶

Highlighting the dangers inherent in the limited war concept Bernard Brodie commented that, "the danger that limited wars may develop explosively into total wars leads one to consider whether the net effect of readiness to adopt limited war strategies is to increase the probability of total war."⁷

Problems Inherent in Limited War Concept

Limited war can be criticized on many counts. The fundamental problem with the concept is that while a war may be planned to be a limited war it is impossible to guarantee that it would remain limited once it gets into the execution phase. As Clausewitz rightly pointed out that all war plans are only good enough till the first bullet is fired, then the fog of war and dynamics of friction take over. The concept of fog of war highlights the difficulty in acquiring timely and accurate information amidst the confusion of the battle and impaired ability to exercise effective command and control over the battlefield. Friction on the other hand explains the difficulty in predicting the intensity and resilience of the enemy's reactions to one's actions. Friction can also be caused by own forces as well, with individual soldiers, subunits or units failing to arrive at the designated places at the given time or going beyond the objectives assigned to them. Moreover, once the battle is joined the events tend to acquire a momentum of their own.

⁶ Henry Kissinger, 'Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy', New York, Harper Collins & Brothers, 1957, pp.139-41.

⁷ Brodie, op.cit., pp. 349.

Therefore, the chances of the events spiraling out of control and escalating to a level beyond the limited war cannot be ruled out. Many experts are therefore, skeptical of the concept especially in a mutual nuclear deterrent environment.

India’s Cold Start Doctrine

The feasibility of the Cold Start doctrine is dependent on meeting certain basic assumptions which the Indian military planners seem to have made⁸ which are as under:-

Assumption-1: It is possible to fight a limited conventional war in a nuclear environment and keep it below the nuclear threshold

This is the basic assumption underlying the Cold Start thinking. While a limited war can be planned and executed, it is not possible to ensure that it remains limited. Pakistan cannot be expected to lose vital territory and find itself in a weak bargaining position at the end of the conflict and will have a strong incentive to raise the stakes for India by taking counter offensive actions. According to Professor John Garnett, the biggest paradox of limited war is that the escalation it is intended to avoid may become a necessary requirement for its termination. Garnett has summed up the views of many Western analysts pointing out that:-

“Military force is a blunt, crude instrument, better compared with the wood cutter’s axe than the surgeon’s scalpel. Inevitably, therefore, war is not usually a nicely calculated, precisely controlled business. More frequently it is a bloody, messy, painful and savage affair, which because it inflames the passions, provides an emotionally charged environment in which miscalculations

⁸ These assumptions have been drawn from by far the most detailed analysis of the Cold Start Strategy by Walter C. Ladwig entitled ‘A Cold Start for Hot Wars’, International Security, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/08, pp.158-90.s

and misperceptions flourish. The theory of controlled escalation ignores the crudity of the military instrument and seriously underplays the psychological pressure on each belligerent to misread his enemy’s moves and to misjudge his own.”⁹

Henry Kissinger has argued that, “since limited wars offer no inherent guarantee against their expansion, they may gradually merge into an all out war.”¹⁰ In a similar vein a Pakistani defense analyst has very aptly summed up the paradox of Cold Start commenting that, “Wars, unfortunately, cannot be fought in ‘halves’ or ‘quarters’. That is the basis of opposition to these concepts of punitive strikes and limited wars, terms carefully avoided in the concept but in fact attempting to actualize them.”¹¹

Assumption-2: Sources of any terrorist incident in India would be outside India and ostensibly in Pakistan

The Cold Start concept has been basically designed to administer ‘punishment’ to Pakistan for any terrorist incident taking place on the Indian soil. It is premised on the belief that source of any terrorist incident on Indian soil will be either in Pakistan or would have tacit support of the Pakistani government agencies. This premise is seriously flawed and tends to ignore the existence of various elements within India with serious grievances against the Indian state. It also does not amplify whether India will retaliate against Pakistan every time a terrorist incident happens in India nor does it clarify the nature and scale of the terrorist incident that would provoke such punitive action by India. The most critical

⁹ Garnett, op.cit., pp. 206.

¹⁰ Kissinger, op.cit., pp. 143 & 167.

¹¹ Brigadier (Retired) Shaukat Qadir, ‘Cold Start: The Nuclear Side’, *Daily Times*, May 16, 2004.

question is how would it determine the scale of punishment that would force Pakistan to desist from any actions inimical to India.¹²

Assumption-3: Pakistani Military would take an Indian blow and sit back quietly without retaliating

The concept somehow is based on the presumption that Pakistani military would accept loss of territory and damage to its field formations and vital installations, sit back quietly without retaliating with all its might. It also downplays Pakistan’s sensitivity to any loss of territory due to its lack of strategic depth. Brigadier Shaukat Qadir believes that as long as Pakistani forces retain the capability of ‘strategic response’ they will be compelled by the public pressure to retaliate which would lead to an escalation of the conflict. Paradoxically, if India attempts to destroy Pakistan’s strategic reserves it runs the risk of crossing Pakistan’s nuclear threshold. However, leaving these forces intact would allow Pakistan the option of expanding the conventional conflict with the potential of escalation to a nuclear level.¹³

Assumption-4 A so called ‘punishing blow’ to Pakistan army would be so effective and long lasting that the Pakistan army’s role as a driver of ‘Pakistan’s aggressive foreign policy’ would be eliminated forever:

Indian military planners seem to believe that Pakistan’s ‘hostile policy’ towards India is driven by the Pakistan army and any reverses suffered by it on the battlefield would erode its position in the Pakistani polity thereby bringing a positive change in Pakistan’s outlook towards India. If this premise is accepted it would be reason enough for Pakistan Army to strongly retaliate against any Indian offensive action rather than accept a loss of face internationally and loss of prestige domestically.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Assumption-5: Pakistan will perceive attacks by multiple IBGs as less provocative and threatening than those by one or two strike corps

The Indians seem to have assumed that attacks by IBGs on multiple axes would be seen as less threatening by Pakistan as compared to one or two major thrusts by the strike corps. In reality, attacks at multiple points by the IBGs may well be viewed by Pakistan as more threatening than a major effort by the strike corps. By cutting down the mobilization time and increasing the possibility of achieving initial surprise Cold Start would in fact enhance uncertainty and cause greater tension even during the peacetime.

Assumption-6: While India brings about doctrinal and organizational changes and relocates its offensive forces, Pakistan will watch passively and would not take appropriate counter measures

While the Cold Start Strategy aims at bringing about fundamental changes in India’s military doctrine and organizational structures it perceives the Pakistani military to stay in its current configuration and dispositions. It would be totally unrealistic, even foolhardy, to believe that Pakistani military will passively watch the transformation of Indian military without taking appropriate counter measures.

Pakistan had a defense strategy based on a doctrine of ‘offensive defense’ with a forward defensive posture due to compulsions of geography. In response to India’s Cold Start Strategy, Pakistan has apparently adopted ‘an exaggerated forward defensive posture’. It has also honed its response to Cold Start through the ‘Azm-i-Nau’

series of military exercises and a new conventional war fighting doctrine.

Assumption-7: Pakistan will be willing to play the game by the rules set by India and would not expand the conflict by taking counter offensive actions at the place of its own choosing

In the words of John Garnett, “it takes two to play a game and if one side neither acknowledges nor approves of the rules, then the game is out of the question.” He has listed some key arguments militating against the concept of limited war as follows:-

- Ideas of limited war are dangerous because they undermine rather than complement the strategy of deterrence.
- Such ideas brought war back into the realm of political practicability.
- The whole body of reasoning implied a level of rationality on the part of decision takers that was quite unrealistic and a degree of control over the battlefield that was technically impossible.¹⁴

Pakistan is neither bound nor should it be expected to play the game by the rules laid down by India and would surely take appropriate counter measures to redress the situation whether or not such Pakistani actions lead to an escalation of the conflict.

Assumption-8: IAF would limit itself to providing close support to Indian Army and would not go for its preferred deep strike missions and that the IAF efforts to neutralize PAF and suppress Pakistani air defenses would not stumble into hitting Pakistan’s strategic assets

If the Cold Start Strategy has to succeed the Indian Air Force (IAF) has to play a very vital role in terms of providing close air support

¹⁴ John Garnett, op. cit. pp. 194-5.

to the ground forces thus compensating for the lack of artillery support to the rapidly moving mechanized forces and India’s serious deficiencies in Self Propelled Artillery. At the same time interdicting Pakistani reserves and preventing the PAF from interfering with the advancing Indian forces. The IAF has traditionally preferred deep strike missions over close air support. It will also be compelled to attack PAF bases in order to keep the PAF off the skies over the zone of operations. This will be running counter to the idea of aiming at shallow objectives to avoid escalation and stay clear of Pakistan’s nuclear red lines since the air operations have a tendency to escalate very rapidly.

The IAF enjoys a substantial numerical advantage over the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) but since it would be fighting in Pakistan’s air space where the combined power of the PAF and Pakistani air defenses would extract a heavy toll on the IAF as well as the attack helicopters. This in itself could lead to escalation of the conflict.¹⁵

There is a possibility that while attacking PAF bases and installations the IAF could advertently or inadvertently hit part of Pakistani strategic assets. This would be seen by Pakistan as a deliberate pre-emptive strike against its deterrent capability and would cause a serious escalation. According to Rodney Jones, “If India contemplates conventional preemptive attacks on the air bases and other ground-based military facilities, one may surmise that Pakistani strategic nuclear assets are likely to come under attack as well. It then follows that Indian conventional posture and doctrine are intrinsically destabilizing.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Shaukat Qadir, op.cit.

¹⁶ Rodney, W. Jones, ‘Nuclear Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia: Structural Factors’, in Michael Krepon, Rodney W. Jones and Ziad Haider eds., ‘Escalation Control and Nuclear Options in South Asia’, Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC, November 2004, pp. 40-41.

Assumption-9: Pakistan would be amenable to India's definition of 'shallow' and 'limited' objectives

The strategy envisages an incursion of 50-80 kilometers inside Pakistani territory which may fit into India's definition of shallow objectives. But given Pakistan's peculiar geography it would be viewed as a critical space. It would be naïve to think that, a 50-80 kilometer advance in the Lahore or Sialkot sectors that would take the Indian forces deep inside and even beyond these highly valuable and politically sensitive cities would not evoke a very strong retaliatory action on part of Pakistan. In some other areas where Pakistan's North-South lines of communications lie perilously close to the international border a similar advance will again provoke a serious response by Pakistan.

Assumption-10: Pakistan totally depends on outside powers to bail it out of a difficult situation and does not have the ability to defend itself against even the limited incursions by India

This assumption also stands on a very shaky ground. Pakistan learnt the bitter lesson during the 1971 War with India, when unrealistic hopes of Chinese and or US military intervention on its behalf did not materialize. The stark realization that Pakistan has to fend for itself was the prime mover behind Pakistan's decision to develop its military nuclear option in the early 1970s. Pakistan's defense strategy is not premised on the intervention of the international community.

Assumption-11: India would be able to acquire enough modern tanks/IFVs to not only replace the obsolete equipment of its strike formations but also provide additional resources to the 'Pivot Corps' to enhance their offensive capability

At present almost half of India's tank consist of obsolescent Vijayantas (1008) and T-55s (715) and bulk of the remaining consist of T-72 s (1925), which are also ageing and undergoing

upgrades. The Indians do have an edge in Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs). The most serious deficiency, however, is in terms of self-propelled artillery wherein India has merely 100 pieces, eighty of those are 105 mm Abbott SP which are old vintage and 20, 130 mm SPs which are improvised and not originally designed as SPs. Compared to this Pakistan has 260 self-propelled guns including 28, 203mm SP Howitzers and the rest are 155 mm of US origin.¹⁷ India is, therefore, in need of a major refurbishment of equipment of its strike forces. They would also need additional armored vehicles to augment the offensive capability of the ‘pivot corps’ and to create the IBGs. Given India’s history of long lead times and inordinate delays in decision making and induction processes it will take a long time to materialize and entail huge financial resources.

Assumption-12: Indians can unambiguously identify Pakistan’s nuclear red lines

Pakistan believes that a certain degree of ambiguity reinforces deterrence and has thus not clearly defined its nuclear red lines. The Cold Start proponents somehow feel that they would be able to unambiguously identify Pakistan’s nuclear red lines and select their targets in a way that they stay below these lines which is a bit too much to hope in the fog of war which in Posen’s words:

“Increases the likelihood of inadvertent escalation because misperceptions, misunderstandings, poor communications and unauthorized or unrestrained offensive operations could reduce the ability of civilian authorities to influence the course of the war. It might also precipitate unexpected but powerful escalatory pressure due to ever higher levels of uncertainty that would develop about the status of the other side’s reactions.”¹⁸

¹⁷Military Balance-2007, IISS, London.

¹⁸ Posen, op.cit. pp.22.

Assumption-13: Lowering of Pakistan’s confidence in its ability to defend itself conventionally would not force it to lower its nuclear threshold and that Pakistan would act rationally in an emotionally charged crisis situation and would not take the extreme decision even when forced into an embarrassing or humiliating situation by India

Though Pakistan does not subscribe to a ‘no first use’ nuclear policy it feels confident that with the existing ratio of forces it can manage to hold off an Indian offensive. However, India’s large scale inductions of high tech weaponry and adoption of the provocative Cold Start doctrine coupled with the involvement of a large segment of Pakistan army in counter terrorism operations along the Western border forced Pakistan to introduce short range battlefield nuclear weapons thus lowering its nuclear threshold. Pakistan cannot, therefore, be expected to act rationally in an emotionally charged crisis situation, refrain from taking the extreme decisions even when forced into an embarrassing situation by India. Citing the example of the French pronouncement that it would use nuclear weapons rather than let the aggressors violate its territory, Barry Posen considers these as ‘standard’ views of the escalation cycle. He believes that such views are rooted in the assumption that, “states are unlikely to leave such effective weapons unutilized in a struggle for vital political interests.”¹⁹

Assumption-14: A military bred on orthodox pattern of thinking and operating would suddenly transform and start producing Guderians and Pattons

The whole concept of Cold Start is premised on the fact that the Indian military bred on an orthodox way of thinking and operating and traditionally averse to risk taking would suddenly transform its strategic culture. The success of this transformation in Indian strategic culture will to a great extent determine the success of

¹⁹ Posen, op.cit., pp.1.

Cold Start Strategy and as Shaukat Qadir commented: “Neither Indian nor Pakistani commanders are comfortable taking risks. There is far too much at stake! It is for this reason most of all that I consider it unlikely that such a concept might actually be tried. If it ever is, I would like to witness it.”²⁰

Conclusion

India’s Cold Start strategy is reflective of innovative and bold thinking on the part of Indian military thinkers. However, its objectives are contradictory in that it aims at undertaking ‘punitive action’ against Pakistan for its so called ‘proxy war’ against India while also attempting to stay under Pakistan’s nuclear threshold. Both cannot be achieved at the same time due to obvious reasons. If the ‘punishment’ is to be consequential with long lasting impact it will in all probability infringe Pakistan’s nuclear red lines, if however, in order to avoid nuclear escalation the ‘punishment’ is mellowed down it would be inconsequential and would raise questions as to whether it is worth taking the risk in the first place. Given the emotionally charged and competitive relationship between India and Pakistan, no one should expect Pakistan to take India’s blow lying down. It is bound to react and the harder the blow the more serious would be its response utilizing all means at its disposal. The danger, however, is that if Indian planners deliberately ignore or underestimate Pakistan’s resilience and try to call ‘Pakistan’s nuclear bluff’ as some in India would suggest they would be asking for trouble. It is easier for the Indians to say that Pakistan would be obliterated as a consequence of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan while India would still survive even if it loses a few of its major cities. However, they seem to have forgotten Herman Kahn’s remark that after a nuclear conflict ‘living will envy the dead’. Pakistan’s problems would be over but Indians would live to face the consequences.

²⁰ Brigadier (Retired) Shaukat Qadir, ‘India’s Cold Start Strategy’, *Daily Times*, May 08, 2004.