

# Positive Prospects for Limited War in South Asia

Rahul Garg\*

*There is sufficient space for India to wage a limited war against Pakistan. Fears of escalation to the nuclear realm are grossly exaggerated by the critics of limited war, who ignore or misinterpret several factors (such as nuclear deterrence and international pressure) that would prevent conflict expansion in South Asia. While the current level of political-diplomatic-military planning in India lacks the capacity to meet the essential tenets of limited war, this can change and the requisite conditions can be achieved through better synergy and collaboration between different spheres. Second, not only is there potential space, but that by exploiting this space India can extract critical gains vis-à-vis Pakistan, which would compensate for the risk (less than assumed) inherent in that exploitation. Furthermore, a limited war posture can work in tandem with and even bolster India's long-term grand strategy in its relationship with Pakistan.*

This paper makes the argument for a renewed emphasis on the military component in India's strategy with regard to Pakistan, based on the concept of limited war. The debate over a limited war in the sub-continent primarily occurs along two lines. First, what are the risks of the escalation of a limited war into nuclear war? Second, even if India can wage a limited war without it escalating into nuclear catastrophe, what purpose will this serve? In essence, will the benefits outweigh the risks? The answer presented here will be a qualified, but achievable, 'yes'.

## Escalation Risks of a Limited War in South Asia<sup>1</sup>

Robert Osgood defines as limited war as one: "to be fought for ends far short of the complete subordination of one state's will to another's using means that involve far less than the total military resources of the belligerents and leave the civilian life and the armed forces of the belligerents largely intact."<sup>2</sup> Its two major tenets are: the supreme control of political leadership over every step of military planning; and the "economy of force", i.e. the specific limitations.<sup>3</sup> While nuclear deterrence does bolster the limited war theory because it forces adversaries to pay critical attention to red-lines and weigh the immediate setbacks against the risk of unacceptable damage, sceptics believe that nuclear weapons encourage inadvertent or deliberate escalation. In addition, the termination of war in a limited war scenario is unique because combatants have the capacity to go forward

---

\* **Rahul Garg** is an undergraduate student at Swarthmore College, PA in the United States.

but do not see any benefit in doing so. Such a war will end through a negotiated settlement, and the final victory will not be clearly defined.

A limited war initiated by India against Pakistan will need to have the following features in order to successfully remain limited: Objectives will have to be limited, stated to the opponent, and well-defined by the political leadership, so that military operations can be properly calibrated in line with political constraints.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the territory involved in conflict, military resources used (weapon type as well as extent of military capacity deployed), and duration of conflict should be such that least encourage expansion of the battle. Finally, bargaining requires proper communication with the adversary and the political class must be able to sell the ambiguous victory to domestic audiences.

The above limits will be heavily influenced by forces and factors unique to the Indo-Pakistan relationship- nuclear deterrence, international opinion (especially the US), domestic audiences (including media), crisis behaviour and decision-making structures in each country. The synergy between the political, diplomatic and military establishments in India will play a determining role in its ability to meet the requirements laid out above, from limited military force to war termination. The bilateral diplomatic communication between India and Pakistan, along with its perceptions, misperceptions, posturing and insecurities will play a decisive role in escalation control. Finally, historical lessons from past crises and cultural impressions of the other side will also affect the behaviour of both states.

**The above limits will be heavily influenced by forces and factors unique to the Indo-Pakistan relationship- nuclear deterrence, international opinion (especially the US), domestic audiences (including media), crisis behaviour and decision-making structures in each country.**

Critics of India's attempts at formulating limited war policies are convinced that the above forces and factors will act to undermine the principles on which a limited

**Crucially, nuclear weapons (in their deterrent capacity) and international pressure are principal factors that negate escalation worries in South Asia.**

war is premised, and therefore such a doctrine if implemented will likely escalate into nuclear catastrophe. However, the nuclear escalation risk in limited war is much lower than they claim.<sup>5</sup> The above forces can operate in directions contrary to those predicted by sceptics, to restrict rather than inflate limited war conflicts. Crucially, nuclear weapons (in their deterrent capacity) and international pressure are principal factors that negate escalation worries in South Asia. However,

this does not mean that all conditions for maintaining limits are contained in the current Indian defence doctrine. Nonetheless, the prospects for fulfilling these conditions and bringing the Indian limited war doctrine in line with limited war theory are bright.

### **Deterrence Pessimists (DPs) versus Deterrence Optimists (DOs)**

To begin, the role of nuclear deterrence as a constraining factor should be studied. Essentially, this brings us to the heated debate between deterrence pessimists (DPs) and deterrence optimists (DOs). DPs claim that a limited war between nuclear-weapon armed India and Pakistan will exacerbate the fog of war and security dilemma, creating time- pressures on leaders and greatly increase the chance of inadvertent escalation. They point to the previous crises in Kargil and 2001-02 as examples where despite nuclear deterrence, both countries were ready to fight a full-scale war.<sup>6</sup>

Although DPs do raise pertinent issues, their argument seems wanting. In both Kargil and the Twin Peaks crisis, as shown by Sumit Ganguly, India had every incentive to escalate in view of: grave provocation from Pakistan, a jingoistic political leadership, a fully supportive domestic opinion, moral support of the international community, conventional military superiority in expanded war and additionally, increased troop and resource loss by keeping war limited.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the nuclear weapons factor had a restraining effect on the leaderships of both sides and prevented them from expanding the conflict. Therefore, the interpretation that nuclear weapons create time-pressures that engender panic is exaggerated; in fact, it makes leaders weigh their options much more carefully, and even provides opportunities to de-escalate and terminate conflict.

The fear among DPs that an Indian limited aggression will provoke a nuclear response from Pakistan seems driven by an unwarranted belief that its military is irrational. Instead, the Pakistani military establishment is probably the one

**The Pakistani military establishment is probably the one permanent institution whose fortunes are most closely tied to the nation's 'survival.'**

permanent institution whose fortunes are most closely tied to the nation's 'survival.' It may be less risk-averse but it is certainly not suicidal or war-prone, and it also estimates costs and benefits as rationally as any state agent can be expected to. Moreover, its leaders are more insulated from the short term electoral pressures faced by their political counterparts. While belligerent elements may exist in the military (as they do in any government decision making group), the uncertain, unlimited consequences of the nuclear overhang will marginalise those opinions.

DPs are convinced that the rhetoric from leaders of both sides during crisis indicates that they were more than willing to escalate and were unaware of full repercussions of nuclear war. However, when the leaders sit down to make war decisions, the fiery rhetoric of nuclear bombing quickly evaporates, which Chari, Cheema and Cohen have aptly termed the “avian paradox”, i.e. hawks quickly turning to doves.<sup>8</sup> This rhetoric should actually be interpreted as the real-world functioning of mutual deterrence, serving mainly as diplomatic posturing or domestic populism. The final war decisions on nuclear weapon use will be taken based on prevailing strategic considerations, not due to a spiralling war of words.

**The final war decisions on nuclear weapon use will be taken based on prevailing strategic considerations, not due to a spiralling war of words.**

### **The International Community Factor**

In addition to bilateral nuclear deterrence, there is an external source of escalation control - the restraining effect of international pressure.<sup>9</sup> The termination of both Kargil and Twin Peaks crises had much to do with international pressure and US involvement in particular.<sup>10</sup> That helped in reducing misperceptions and miscommunication to a level that would prevent inadvertent escalation. This factor is unique to the South Asian security context today and goes beyond what is required by the theory of limited war.

Nonetheless, limited war sceptics contend that such an Indian aggression will most likely evoke widespread condemnation from the international community.<sup>11</sup> They claim it will harm India’s grand image as a peaceful rising great power and tie it inextricably to the problems of its unstable neighbour. However, these fears are misplaced. They forget that India’s ability to present itself as a stable, secure aspiring power depends greatly on its capacity to generate security policies that account for the threats it faces and will face in its neighbourhood.

More importantly, Indian restraint in the face of repeated and grave provocative sub-conventional attacks in the past decade has helped it accumulate a good amount of international mileage on the cross-border terrorism issue. Given the current state of the War on Terror, and the widespread impression that Pakistan is a hot-bed of global Islamic terrorism, the situation is ripe for India to leverage it in its favour. In fact, a repeated lack of response from India is counter-productive to its policy of building international pressure on Pakistan to dismantle terror infrastructure. That policy is predicated on India’s ability to convince the international community that it restrains itself for *their* sake; if it becomes apparent that India will in any case remain passive, the international community will be

**A limited aggression can actually work to India's benefit by spurring the international community into action on the Pakistan terror apparatus.**

dis-incentivised to make any efforts to pressurise Pakistan on cross-border terrorism. A limited aggression can actually work to India's benefit by spurring the international community into action on the Pakistan terror apparatus.

There is one potent criticism of this optimistic view of the international reaction to an Indian limited war. The United States has a personal interest in preventing an India-Pakistan war due to its war effort in Afghanistan. Although this will be a limiting factor, in light of the above arguments if the attacks are publicised appropriately enough to the

American leadership and public, it will be difficult for the US to take a strong stance against Indian punitive attacks. Moreover, currently Pakistan uses this strategic dynamic to play off India and the US against each other, to deflect Indian military aggression on its eastern border. India can turn this around to its own advantage by playing the US off against Pakistan in order to coerce the US to increase pressure on Pakistan. Vice versa, it could also exploit this dynamic to threaten Pakistani leaders that in case they do not dismantle terror camps, they will have to face the ire of the US on the western border, or face trouble in their diplomatic alliance with the US. A limited war posture would be the most convincing way to generate this type of dynamic.

In sum, international involvement will greatly aid in increasing communication, reducing misperceptions and making the intentions of the two sides clear to each other in a limited war. Given India's past restraint on this issue and the current world image of Pakistan, international restraining pressure on India may not be enough to stop it from attacking, but will still act forcefully to prevent any escalation into nuclear realm. The Indian diplomatic community will have to go into over drive to mould international opinion in India's its favour, but given the present international scenario it is achievable.

### **Definition of Victory**

One of the most interesting aspects of a limited war is the ambiguous definition of victory. Not only will victory or defeat be partial, but it will also be fluid in its interpretation. This is a necessary condition for the end of a limited war.

**Given India's past restraint on this issue and the current world image of Pakistan, international restraining pressure on India may not be enough to stop it from attacking, but will still act forcefully to prevent any escalation into nuclear realm.**

This requires a clear acceptance by political and military leaders that a limited war will necessarily entail losses. They must understand that the supreme goal is *limited* gains, not outright victory.<sup>12</sup> Second, they must sell this understanding to their publics, and withstand pressure from political opposition groups. Jingoistic domestic opinions egged on by the frenzied media in South Asia, especially during crises, will make this difficult.<sup>13</sup>

As such, the leaders will need to educate the public about the nature and concept of limited war, while also dealing with reactionary media during the crisis.<sup>14</sup> Second, they still need to have a fluid interpretation of goals to be achieved, so that war can be terminated without pressure to expand. Ahmed explains that the doctrine will require multiple exit points, or “saliencies”.<sup>15</sup> These are specific political objectives identified in advance so that as the conflict unfolds, the political leaders know that they can terminate war at each of these points and take back a satisfactory definition of victory or stalemate to their population.

**As such, the leaders will need to educate the public about the nature and concept of limited war, while also dealing with reactionary media during the crisis.<sup>14</sup>**

Raghavan comments that limited war entails deliberate losses for the military.<sup>16</sup> As the war unfolds, pressure will build on politicians to give the military a freer hand to escalate. Therefore, a clear understanding of and control over limited war doctrines is required from the political leadership. Unfortunately, the current Indian limited war doctrine, called ‘Cold Start’, created independently by the Indian army, seems to be seriously lacking in tackling the ‘definition of victory’ issue.<sup>17</sup> This is a direct result of not following the primary tenet of limited war theory, i.e. the primacy of politics over military.

**Therefore, a clear understanding of and control over limited war doctrines is required from the political leadership.**

Nonetheless, while this does makes the current doctrine dangerous, it neither means that sufficient space does not *exist* and nor does it imply that India cannot *potentially* exploit that space. Past Indo-Pakistan conflicts have ended with each country’s leader interpreting the result as satisfactory/ victorious for their respective sides, barring the 1971 war. For example in Kargil, Pakistan managed to revive the Kashmir issue without any real punitive harm and India managed to expel infiltrators. Similarly, in the 2001-02 stand-off, India managed to extract concessions (if temporary) on terrorism and Pakistan managed to ward off a superior conventional power through its nuclear deterrent. Second, the Indian political elite have done well over the past decade to contain bellicose popular



sentiment when making war decisions. Third, the Kargil experience showed that if the political leadership makes the objectives clear, then in spite of pressure from the military, the armed forces do not cross limits.<sup>18</sup> Thus, mitigating the tensions arising from the definition of victory problem is not 'undoable' if policymakers are so inclined.

### Importance of Communication

The above analysis also brings up the issue of communication, required for escalation control and war termination. Narrowing the gap for greater understanding of each side's salencies is necessary for designating appropriate political objectives and military tactics. Therefore, it is crucial to establish communication forums (tacit or formal) for pre-and in-conflict negotiations.

Even if salencies are not perfectly agreed upon, it is imperative to hold broad discussions to estimate others' salencies in a limited war situation. Unfortunately, India has not taken even the first step in this regard.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, with proactive diplomatic efforts, this may not be too difficult to achieve. The reasons are as follows. First, as mentioned before, international diplomatic channels (especially the US) serve as excellent facilitators for resolving issues stemming from misperceptions and communication. Second, recommendations to push diplomacy into "high gear" through increased use of hotlines, backchannels, track-two contacts, and a single spokesperson for defence, are avenues that both countries have used in the past.<sup>20</sup> Third, the poor reading by military strategists of the other side's responses is less worrisome than made out to be. Crises like Brasstacks in 1987 and the compound crisis in 1990 can be interpreted as those where military manoeuvres did not

**Recently, Pakistan and the US have held strategic dialogue forums that have strengthened their alliance in the War on Terror, and India has expanded strategic communication with China, which has helped defuse tensions over border issues.**

materialise because of the anticipation of a potent response.<sup>21</sup> In addition, having spent over a decade now with the nuclear umbrella, the militaries may be better able to judge responses in a nuclearised environment than they were in the few years after tests were carried out in 1998.

Further, the Indian diplomatic establishment can generate ideas to engage the Pakistan military establishment directly, and to develop military-military or government- military strategic communication links and channels with the Pakistani military. There is precedence for this from the Cold War, when the US and USSR had tacit and explicit strategic cooperation with regards to their nuclear and conventional war doctrines.<sup>22</sup> Recently, Pakistan and the US have held strategic dialogue

forums that have strengthened their alliance in the War on Terror, and India has expanded strategic communication with China, which has helped defuse tensions over border issues. Although such initiatives are still trapped in the theoretical stage due to bureaucratic inertia, if implemented they would go a far way in reducing the historic mistrust and misperception between the Indian government and Pakistani military.<sup>23</sup>

### **Escalatory Potential: Pakistan's Response**

Critics of limited war are extremely worried that the Pakistani response to an Indian limited aggression will involve recourse to escalation and nuclear weapon use. Khurshid Khan, an eminent Pakistani strategic expert, reports that Pakistan does not believe that any strategic space exists for limited war, and instead would view any form of Indian aggression as an outright act of war threatening its sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> That Pakistan would respond to an Indian attack with counter-thrusts into Indian territory is repeated by several limited war pessimists.<sup>25</sup> Given India's defence principle to ferociously protect its territory, there is a high chance of the war expanding.

Critics of limited war are extremely worried that the Pakistani response to an Indian limited aggression will involve recourse to escalation and nuclear weapon use.

Another fear is that the Pakistani armed forces, facing defeat in the limited war, will deliberately escalate it in order to avoid the political fallout post the war or to make the international community pressure India into withdraw its troops.<sup>26</sup> Most deterrence pessimists worry that limited war underestimates the significance of organisational pathologies in the Pakistan army, which tend to miscalculate Indian response.<sup>27</sup>

Tarapore points out that unlike India, where nuclear weapons are considered more 'non-usable', in Pakistan strategic planning, nuclear weapon use plays a central role.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Pakistan has a flexible nuclear policy (or "asymmetric nuclear posture") in contrast to India's assured massive retaliation doctrine.<sup>29</sup> It may even undertake a nuclear strike in its own territory against advancing Indian troops, especially in the desert area.

Most of these concerns are greatly diminished once they are put in context of the low risk of escalatory potential in South Asia due to deterrence stability and the international restraint effect, already discussed in the paper. The Indian doctrine of massive retaliation makes it clear that any nuclear weapon use will lead to a



catastrophic nuclear war.<sup>30</sup> In fact, as Tarapore has pointed out, the credibility of the Indian military doctrine will be at stake in case Pakistan chooses to go in for nuclear use. Nuclear deterrence, will restrain Pakistan so long as its survival or very critical nuclear thresholds are not breached. In that case, a mere “attack on sovereignty” will not justify escalation to full-scale conventional war, which has a very high probability of turning nuclear due to the problem of pre-emptive

**The idea that Pakistan will readily escalate the war to higher levels is misguided- they will either fight the war in a limited form or directly launch nuclear weapons.**

nuclear attacks (see war spectrum annex). Further, escalation to a full scale conventional war is *not* in Pakistan’s interest, for it loses the strategic parity it enjoys with India in the limited war. The idea that Pakistan will readily escalate the war to higher levels is misguided- they will either fight the war in a limited form or directly launch nuclear weapons. However, since launching nuclear weapons will only be rational if war escalates to the higher conventional level, and since the limited war can in all likelihood be resolved through stalemate or negotiated settlement, Pakistan would not launch nuclear weapons.

In addition, with a limited war, Pakistan can at least attempt to gain some international sympathy, whereas by launching a nuclear bomb it would face widespread condemnation.<sup>31</sup> It should also be anticipated that Pakistan’s nuclear first use would be preceded by signs of doing so- in that case international community would be spurred into determined action to force both to draw down the war. Within that time India would have achieved certain objectives. Finally, given Pakistan’s image in today’s global War on Terror, India’s belligerence will likely be seen only as a retaliatory punitive measure in response to a grave provocation by an unstable state.

I have already made the point that in spite of perceived organisational pathologies, the Pakistani military cannot be seen as less rational than any other stable government leadership; the argument that it values its national survival less and therefore would risk nuclear war more does not hold. In addition, the military would like to limit its engagement so that it can preserve sufficient strategic reserves to maintain power in the country post war.<sup>32</sup> Historically after crises (except for the major 1971 war) the Pakistani army has been able

**While nuclear weapons are indeed pivotal in Pakistan’s defence doctrine, it would be a mistake to stretch their use beyond the needs dictated by rational nuclear deterrence.**

to maintain its pre-conflict position with ease. A deliberate nuclear bombing by it (even if 'limited' or tactical) to maintain its position post-conflict or to attract international attention makes little sense because of the extremely high chances of its escalating into a full scale nuclear war, in which case the post-conflict power structure would be highly unpredictable (and not much may be left to rule over). While nuclear weapons are indeed pivotal in Pakistan's defence doctrine, it would be a mistake to stretch their use beyond the needs dictated by rational nuclear deterrence.

The possibility that Pakistan will detonate a nuclear bomb on advancing Indian troops seems appealing at first. This would not receive international condemnation because the sole target will be the invading Indian troops. Indian troops would subsequently retreat and the leadership would have a clear victory to take back to the domestic audience, with little risk of massive retaliation from India. However,

**The leader who takes the nuclear plunge would have to bear the brunt of domestic anger blaming him for bombing his own land, instead of fighting the enemy.**

the likelihood of this scenario is minimal. First, it makes little sense that Pakistan (or any country) would risk the harmful effects of nuclear fallout on its own territory. Second, the leader who takes the nuclear plunge would have to bear the brunt of domestic anger blaming him for bombing his own land, instead of fighting the enemy. Third, the international response may be negative, confirming Pakistan's infamous reputation as an irresponsible nuclear power. Fourth, this would only serve India's original purpose to impose punitive costs through limited aggression.

There are various scenarios in which India may breach Pakistan's nuclear threshold in course of regular military operations- such as inadvertently striking nuclear related facilities, advancing into the weakly guarded desert region triggering fears of dismemberment, or approaching perilously close to population centres in Punjab.<sup>33</sup> While these are surely vital points raised by critics, it does not mean that they cannot be addressed. The escalatory threat in most of these scenarios can either be eliminated or mitigated through suitable calibration of military tactics. For instance, limits placed on strategic targeting, extent of enemy force engaged in war and geography can resolve many of the above. While sceptics argue that such a control is difficult to achieve, they forget that the uniquely cautious planning of limited aggressions "affords" "carefully

**The escalatory threat in most of these scenarios can either be eliminated or mitigated through suitable calibration of military tactics.**

calibrated pressure, signalling and tight control.”<sup>34</sup> As Sethi argues, this type of calibration is not difficult to achieve, and clear objectives and military-political synergy can enable the avoidance of stepping over nuclear tripwires.<sup>35</sup>

### **Limited War as a Beneficial Strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan**

Sceptics have assailed Indian limited war policy as lacking utility. Tarapore has passionately argued that the benefits of a limited war are reversible and at best marginal.<sup>36</sup> Ahmed echoes the point that a limited war may not be worth the risks inherent in it.<sup>37</sup> At the most, a successful limited war will only serve to quench the domestic revenge appetite, provide the Indian military with some more prestige and relevance (‘something to do’), or leverage some extra international attention.<sup>38</sup> Khurshid Khan supports this by providing the Pakistani viewpoint that India’s ability to change Pakistan’s actions or will, through punitive measures, is extremely limited.<sup>39</sup> That Pakistan will obediently follow the diktat of its powerful neighbour through limited military belligerence is an unlikely prospect. Ganguly and Kapur put forth two additional criticisms of a limited war that would render it ineffective.<sup>40</sup> First, a short, limited war with Pakistan would not be enough to compel it to crack down on terrorists. India would need a full scale conventional war in order to achieve this goal. Second, the Pakistan army may not have the capacity to crackdown on jihadi elements inside its own territory, even if it wanted to do so.

### **Altering the Cost- Benefit Calculus for Pakistan’s Military**

Unfortunately, these criticisms overlook the need for and the substantial gains that can be made with an appropriate limited war strategy. First, any limited war does have risks inherent in it, as Ahmed rightly points out, but as the previous section showed that these risks are much lower than deterrence pessimists and limited war sceptics presume. Moreover, many of the risks can be mitigated by an appropriate doctrine prepared through military-political-diplomatic synergy. Second, the long- standing non-military deterrence policy has failed in ending Pakistani support to cross-border terror activities. The primary reason is that Pakistan’s increased sub-conventional aggression is a result of the structural nature of the Indo-Pakistan strategic relationship, whereby nuclearisation has allowed and encouraged Pakistan to exploit instability at lower levels. To tackle this structural problem in the military relationship, India needs to begin formulating policies that “consider the military option seriously.”<sup>41</sup>

Third, while Pakistan’s direct support to militancy has reduced, its tacit support by way of *not* cracking down on militant groups targeting India, allows “non-state actors” in its territory to freely plan for and implement jihadi activities against

its neighbour. For example, even as the army has launched counterinsurgency operations against the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban (in cooperation with the US), groups that support Kashmiri militancy or attacks in India are allowed to operate with impunity (and also sympathy). Therefore, a shift to compellence is essential to pressurise the Pakistani establishment into taking concrete action against the anti-India terror infrastructure in its territory.

Limited war provides the solution to the cross-border terrorism problem by imposing real, measurable or meaningful symbolic costs on the adversary for its sub-conventional adventurism. It signals to the enemy that covert sub-conventional warfare cannot be carried out with impunity, and that they will be forced to pay either through defeat in, or at the very least by being engaged in, a restricted conventional battle. As Kissinger puts it, "It reflects an attempt to *affect* the opponents' will, not to *crush* it".<sup>42</sup> Moreover, a credible limited war *posture* might alone be sufficient to change the state's behaviour.

Limited war provides the solution to the cross-border terrorism problem by imposing real, measurable or meaningful symbolic costs on the adversary for its sub-conventional adventurism.

This will amend the Pakistani establishment's cost-benefit analysis when devising policy on the extent to which it should support/ crackdown on anti-India terror groups within the country. Currently, a temporary hit to the nation's international reputation is the only cost of the army's proxy war policy.<sup>43</sup> With limited war, due to the exploitation of space by India below the nuclear threshold, army strategists sympathetic to cross-border terrorism will have to factor in the losses that an Indian military response will entail. Even if the army expects to ward off the Indian aggression, its policy officials will need to incorporate the costs incurred while doing so. Limited war would marginalise opinions that advocate perverse asymmetric warfare, because that policy will now be accompanied with the high risk of significant damages.

Ganguly and Kapur's contention that the military establishment, which has had open ties in the past with organisations targeting India, will not be able to reasonably contain the activities of these organisations if considered necessary, is hard to believe. For one, the army has conducted operations against fundamentalist groups, albeit excluding India-centric ones from the ambit. Given the legacy of connections between the military and the latter groups, it will not be difficult to target their leadership or coerce them to restrict their activities.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, extensive military force, which would be accompanied by domestic criticism, may not be required to curtail the ability of anti-India groups to carry out complex cross-border terror attacks. Ceasing to provide cover to infiltrators crossing

the Line of Control, implementing domestic legal mechanisms on terror group activities, influencing public opinion, monitoring activities of 'rogue' elements in the establishment, and a genuine crackdown on jihadi training camps are small

**The possibility of a limited war by India, which alters the cost-benefit ratio in planning, will prompt military officials to re-prioritise their actions towards India-centric groups and make them actions effective.**

steps that can have a large impact. The possibility of a limited war by India, which alters the cost-benefit ratio in planning, will prompt military officials to re-prioritise their actions towards India-centric groups and make them actions effective.

According to Chandran, an Indian limited war should be "aimed at...secur(ing) India's interests in Jammu and Kashmir amid the larger issues of Indo-Pakistan relations."<sup>45</sup> He goes on to argue that since an Indian limited war would not meet that objective, irrespective of whether sufficient space exists for such a war it would be unhelpful for India. Unfortunately, he misidentifies the aim of a limited Indian attack. Cross-border terrorism is in and of itself a strong enough provocation to

warrant limited war. Pakistan-sourced terror attacks have become one of India's two most pertinent security concerns (the other being left wing extremism), having put in constant jeopardy the security of citizens for which the Indian state is responsible (and on which, in fact, it is premised, as any state is).<sup>46</sup> As Bakshi laments, "Over 700 ordinary citizens killed in a single year cannot be treated as an irritating detail", and the Indian public's threshold for suffering terror attacks has been dangerously tested.<sup>47</sup> Beyond a point, improvements in internal security apparatus cannot prevent a determined enemy from succeeding, especially one who is left unfettered to plan and train right across the border. Therefore, an Indian limited war will be in response to a provocative terror attack, aimed to check Pakistan's adventurism in the sub-conventional realm and disturbing their strategic calculus for asymmetric warfare. In that way, it can protect its citizens from the dangers of Pakistan based terror attacks.

### **The Counterproductive- Results Worry**

A concern raised by critics is that a limited war will not only be pointless, but might even be counter-productive.<sup>48</sup> An aggressive Indian military attack will lead to greater concentration of power in the hands of the Pakistani army, validate and reinforce

**Therefore, an Indian limited war will be in response to a provocative terror attack, aimed to check Pakistan's adventurism in the sub-conventional realm and disturbing their strategic calculus for asymmetric warfare.**



its strategic insecurity of living next door to a menacing superior power, and perpetuate its perverse asymmetric war strategic thinking. It will also greatly increase hostility against India inside Pakistan, with fundamentalists and anti-India terror groups whipping up nationalist sentiment in their favour.

However, the above scenario of Pakistan resorting to more asymmetric warfare completely ignores the preceding discussion of a changed cost-benefit calculus for Pakistani strategic thinkers with the introduction of limited war. Even if war termination does not result in formal agreement, the punitive feature of India's now demonstrated compellence strategy will disincentivise military planners from supporting proxy war adventurism. Concentration of power in the hands of the Pakistan army is more a function of Pakistan's domestic political system than Indian influence, and may not necessarily mean that the former will become more belligerent. It should be pointed out that Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir began under Benazir Bhutto. Terrorist attacks have continued in the past decades, even with the shift to democracy in Pakistan. In fact, the recent promising peace processes was started during the military dictatorship of General Musharraf.

The point that Pakistan's feelings of strategic insecurity with regard to India will be validated - may or may not be true. It could be optimistically perceived that post a limited operation by India, the military will finally realise that India has neither the intention (nor the capability in a nuclearised environment) to dismember Pakistan or conquer parts of it. Consequently, the perceived 'existential threat' from India will reduce.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, even if the existential threat perception remains, the Pakistan military will realise that asymmetric warfare is no longer a viable response to that threat. Consequently, it may seriously consider a peaceful reconciliation with India to be in its long term strategic interest. In any case, this strategic insecurity will continue to exist until there is greater strategic communication between the two nations; the current political dialogue process which excludes the Pakistani military from the process does not address this.

The fear of a lurch to the right within Pakistan is legitimate, though again its impact is exaggerated by sceptics. In any state that goes to war, there is a temporary movement towards patriotic rhetoric. However, as seen in the case of nuclear deterrence, the nation's leaders (here the Pakistan army) will be forced to take decisions that best secure their long term strategic interest. The introduction of a limited war scenario will make it incumbent on the army to manage fundamentalist rhetoric, and guide the people away from an asymmetric war policy - in their own interest. Note that the maximum rhetoric will occur mainly during the

**The introduction of a limited war scenario will make it incumbent on the army to manage fundamentalist rhetoric, and guide the people away from an asymmetric war policy - in their own interest.**



crisis, when the country is most likely to rally behind the military leadership and their judgment. Moreover, the military will be aided in resisting domestic criticism due to the negotiated settlement aspect of limited war termination, which will provide it with face-saving returns from the battle. While domestic considerations are important, it must be observed that the overlying inter-state strategic balance can operate to contain them.

Moreover, by raising the level of warfare up from a sub-conventional proxy war, where India has neither the inclination nor the ability to succeed, to a limited conventional war, India will be able to best leverage its military capacity in negating Pakistan's policy of exploiting instability at lower levels of the war spectrum due to the stable deterrence at the higher level.

### **Limited War Can Contribute to the Larger Peace Process**

Ahmed argues that a limited war military doctrine undermines the dialogue process with Pakistan. The following arguments will show that the choice is not an either/or one. Limited war can not only operate alongside the peace process, but also bolster it.

It must be made amply clear that limited war is not a tool that can directly be used to solve the long running disputes between India and Pakistan. In the long term, for political issues between the two - such as Kashmir and water - sustained dialogue and confidence building measures are the only answer. However, what limited war enables India to do is to strategically tackle the low-level aggressive behaviour of Pakistan, which is driven by the stability that exists at higher levels of the spectrum. By mitigating the terror problem and the crises that emerge from it, an Indian limited war posture weakens the biggest obstacle to the peace process in South Asia.<sup>50</sup> In the short and medium term, it creates more space for peace, even as the larger political dispute carries on and is resolved through dialogue.

**However, with a limited war strategy in place, the structural problem in the strategic relationship is negated, and disputes can be resolved through the running dialogue process.**

In addition, it sets a good precedent for future disputes. For issues that may crop up in the future beyond Kashmir, nuclearisation allows Pakistan to always turn to the asymmetric warfare option to generate pressure on India to meet its demands. However, with a limited war strategy in place, the structural problem in the strategic relationship is negated, and disputes can be resolved through the running dialogue process. Also, with a military solution to the terror problem, right-wing groups

in India might garner less support for their frequent demand to derail dialogue. This is because there is another available short and medium term strategy to deal with lower level warfare, instead of the long-term dialogue process.

Furthermore, a limited war posture may speed up the larger political dialogue by bringing the ruling establishments to the negotiating table, especially in the short run.<sup>51</sup> Although Pakistan has demonstrated its willingness to engage in dialogue already, the introduction of the limited war scenario will create a strong incentive for it to reach an amicable compromise. With security pressures hanging in the background for both nations - for India due to Pakistan's sub-conventional threat and Pakistan due to a conventional response from India, decision-makers will become more serious about resolving outstanding disputes.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, there is one bonus possibility arising from a limited war in South Asia that should also be considered. India and Pakistan have been stumbling through the peace process for almost a decade now. Terror attacks have repeatedly delayed negotiations by years. A limited war will be a "big event" in South Asia, and after its termination an environment may develop for a more permanent resolution of long-running disputes. Note that the conflict itself may have started with just terrorism on the agenda, but post the war, attitudes in leaderships of both countries may be inclined towards solving the disputes once and for all. The fears of escalation and exhaustion generated during the conflict will push them towards this. This hypothesis is most applicable to the international community, who will be sure to apply significant pressure on both countries to talk, and may even forcefully act as facilitators.

**A limited war will be a "big event" in South Asia, and after its termination an environment may develop for a more permanent resolution of long-running disputes.**

*The author would like to express his heartfelt thanks to Professor Kanti Bajpai, Robert Upton, Stephen P. Cohen, Ali Ahmed, Moeed Yusuf, V. Krishnappa and the anonymous referee for their valuable suggestions and criticism.*



---

Notes:

- 1 Throughout the paper limited war will refer to as limited conventional war. The 'war spectrum' can be understood as: threat to use force < troop mobilisation without war < sub-conventional/ asymmetric proxy war < limited conventional war < full scale conventional war < nuclear war. Note that limited nuclear strike at any level would likely move quickly to nuclear war given nuclear uncertainty and India's deterrence doctrine. Note: i) This paper assumes that both India and Pakistan have established a minimum credible deterrent, with second-strike capacity (or at least

- a mutually-recognised potent threat of it), so that each has the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on the other.
- ii) It should also be qualified here that a limited war initiated by India would be a follow-up to a grave terror attack on its soil, that it believed originated in or had links to Pakistan.
- 2 Quoted Osgood in D. Subha Chandran, *Limited War: Revisiting Kargil in the Indo-Pak Conflict*, India Research Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 3; Salik, Naeem Ahmed, "Perils of 'Limited War' in a Nuclear Environment", *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2004, pp. 13-27.
  - 3 Quoted Osgood in D. Subha Chandran, *Limited War: Revisiting Kargil in the Indo-Pak Conflict*, see note. 2, p. 53; Quoted Schelling in Chandran, see note 2.
  - 4 Sethi, Manpreet, "Conventional War in the Presence of Nuclear Weapons", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2009, pp. 415- 425.
  - 5 This paper will be structured around criticisms of limited war in India, because much of the well informed scholarship seems biased against limited war. However, these critics seem to be guided by premises such as a lack of faith in nuclear deterrence or in compellence as a strategy, views that I do not hold. Since the issues they raise are still the pertinent ones with respect to limited war, it is fruitful to look at them again with a different set of assumptions.
  - 6 Chari, P. R. *et al.*, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2008, p. 188; Goswami, Namrata, "Review Essay: The Essence of the South Asian Nuclear Debate", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Jul-Sep 2006, pp. 662 – 674; Kapur, S. Paul, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace", *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2005, pp. 127 –152; Synnott, H., *The Causes and Consequences of South Asia's Nuclear Tests*, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999.
  - 7 Ganguly, Sumit, "Toward Nuclear Stability in South Asia", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2009, pp. 381 – 392; Ganguly, Sumit and Hagerty, Devin, *Fearful Symmetry*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.
  - 8 Chari, P.R., *et al.*, see note. 6, p. 196.
  - 9 Of course, note that international pressure is a result and positive function of the nuclearization of India and Pakistan.
  - 10 Chari, P.R., see note 6.
  - 11 Tarapore, Arzan, "Holocaust or Hollow Victory: Limited War in Nuclear South Asia", *IPCS Research Papers #6*, February 2005.
  - 12 Singh, Swaran, 2000.
  - 13 Chari, see note. 6.
  - 14 Ahmed, Ali, "IDSA Comment: Political Dimensions of Limited War", *Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA)*, New Delhi, March 29, 2010.
  - 15 ----- "IDSA Comment: Exit Points and the Updation of Cold Start Doctrine", IDSA, New Delhi, April 22, 2009. And also see "Saliencies" is a term taken from Thomas Schelling".
  - 16 Raghavan, V. R., "Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia", *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2001, pp.2 – 18.
  - 17 Ladwig III, Walter C., "A Cold Start for Hot Wars?: The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine", *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/08, pp. 158-190; Raghavan, see note. 16; Salik, see note. 2. The 'Cold-Start' doctrine, unveiled by the Indian Army in 2004, envisions IBGs (Integrated Battle Groups) making short thrusts of about 50-80km into Pakistani territory within just 72-96 hours after the command is given. However, India has not able to implement the doctrine due to lack of capacity (inadequate artillery, rapid attack equipment), inter-agency troubles (Air Force hesitant to get on board), and poor communication between the military and civilian government. While the military capacity issues are soon expected to be overcome (Cyril Almeida, 'Kayani spells out threat posed by Indian doctrine', *Dawn*, 4 February 2010), Cold-Start will likely remain a 'non-starter' until political leaders have confidence in and control over the planning and implementation of the limited war operations.
  - 18 In Pakistan, the military's goals will be constrained by political objectives in any case, because it is the military leadership that decides the political objectives when it comes to India.
  - 19 Ahmed, Ali, "IDSA Comment: India's Response to the Next Terror Attack", *IDSA*, August 26, 2009. Although the Cold Start doctrine is partially public, it only betrays a lack of initiative to discuss with the enemy on saliencies, and Pakistan is likely to interpret the worst-case scenarios of the document in the absence of further explanation.

- 20 Ibid and Chari, P.R., see note. 6, both hotlines and track two were used during crises.
- 21 From author's reading of the description of events in Chari, P.R., see note. 6. Note that Chari, Cheema and Cohen do not make this argument.
- 22 Chandran, see note. 2; also see Ahmed, Ali Ahmed, "IDSA Comment: For an Indo-Pak Strategic Dialogue Forum", *IDSA*, August 4, 2009, about the 'Standing Consultative Commission' between the two superpowers during the second half of the Cold War.
- 23 Singh, Harinder and Phadke, Ramesh, "IDSA Comment: Indo Pak Rapprochement: Unexplored Option of Military to Military Engagement", *IDSA*, June 25, 2010. One troubling problem here is about Pakistani silence on Indian limited war doctrines. Its refusal to respond to the discussion on limited war makes it extremely difficult to reach any understanding on salencies. In fact, it is quite an intelligent strategy (but may not be deliberate) on its part to not get into the discussion and thereby increase perceived risks of any Indian limited war strategy. Still, if India can implement a pro-active diplomatic initiative that tries to *draw in* Pakistan into the debate, then beyond a point it would be hard for Pakistan to continue its silence. Also, by being initiating the discussion, India would have framed it in a manner conducive to its own interests and interpretation- Kissinger had similarly argued that, "Even a unilateral declaration of what we understand by limited war would accomplish a great deal because it would provide a strong incentive to the Soviet Union to adopt a similar interpretation." Quoted in Chandran, see note 2, p. 21.
- 24 Khan, Khurshid, "Limited War Under the Nuclear Umbrella and its Implications for South Asia", *Henry L. Stimson Center: Project on Regional Security in South Asia*, March 9, 2005, pp. 22-29.
- 25 Ladwig, 2008: p. 169; Chandran, 2005, pp. 118-119, Raghavan, 2001.
- 26 Chandran, see note 2, pp. 119-20
- 27 Raghavan, 2001; Tarapore, 2005; Sagan, S. D., "Nuclear Instability in South Asia", in S. D. Sagan, & K. N. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, W.W. Norton and Company, 1995, pp. 251-262.
- 28 Tarapore, 2005, p. 18.
- 29 Narang, Vipin, "Posturing for Peace", *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2009, pp. 38-78; Tarapore, 2005.
- 30 Even if the Indian claim of complete destruction is not believable, it is likely that nuclear use will lead it to inflict unacceptable damage in the form of bombing of cities.
- 31 Ahmed, Ali, "Military Response to a Future 26/11: A Deterrence Analysis", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 2009, pp. 9-15.
- 32 ----- "IDSA Comment: India-Pakistan Conflict Outcome Probability", *IDSA*, October 27, 2009
- 33 Raghavan, 2001; Ladwig, 2008; Ahmed, see note 31.
- 34 Salik, 2004, p. 16.
- 35 Sethi, 2009.
- 36 Tarapore, 2005, pp. 18-22.
- 37 Ahmed, see note. 31.
- 38 Tarapore, 2005, p. 22.
- 39 Khan, 2005, pp. 27-28.
- 40 Ganguly, Sumit and Kapur, S. Paul, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Islamist Militancy in South Asia", *The Washington Quarterly*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 2010, pp. 55-56.
- 41 Ahmed, August 26, 2009.
- 42 Quoted Kissinger in Swaran Singh, 1995, p. 58.
- 43 Moreover, this hit is incident on the political class instead of the military leadership.
- 44 See statement by Bruce Reidel, a former CIA officer and Washington expert on South Asia, in *Dawn*, "Can Pakistan Shut Down Lashkar-i-Taiba?", June 21, 2009.
- 45 Chandran, see note. 2, p. 125.

- 46 Limited war critics contend that such a response is only justified if Pakistan makes incursions into Indian territory. It seems arbitrary, however, to have a separate standard for national security threats of territorial capture and national security threats of random terror bombings/ *fidayeen* attacks that constantly destabilize the peace of citizens across the country. Such a stance is particularly unreasonable when one realizes that in both cases, i) an external agent is perpetrating the harm to national security, and ii) lack of response sets precedent for further incursions/ attacks, to an extent.
- 47 Bakshi, G.D., "Mumbai Redux: Debating India's Strategic Response Options", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 4, October 2009, pp.16-26.
- 48 Ganguly and Kapur, 2010, p. 56; S. Paul Kapur, "South Asia's Unstable Nuclear Decade", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 3,, 2009, p. 399; Tarapore, 2005.
- 49 "Existential Threat" explained in Narang, 2009.
- 50 Shukla, Raj, "Use of Force: Possibilities in the Indo - Pak Context", *Journal of Defence Studies*, 1995, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 2009, pp. 1-8.
- 51 This does not contradict the earlier point that limited war creates space for peace. Limited war creates space for peace by mitigating the terror strike obstacle, which it does through its threat of violent conventional conflict.
- 52 Note: This paper assumes that finding a bilateral solution to the Kashmir problem sooner rather than later is in India's long-term interest.