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## **Coercive Diplomacy: Operation Parakram in Retrospect**

**Ashok K Mehta**

**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES**

**Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw**, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC**  
**1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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**Ashok K Mehta**



Centre for Land Warfare Studies  
New Delhi



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# Coercive Diplomacy: Operation Parakram in Retrospect

## Abstract

When mobilization was ordered for Operation Parakram on 15 December, no one knew if it would lead to war but Army Chief, General Sundararajan Padmanabhan thought it was for real: he had got the chance he was waiting for—to punish Pakistan for cross-border terrorism. The IAF and Navy were outside the CBT orbit. The Cabinet Committee for Security (CCS) had hawks, doves and realists. The decision-maker was to be Prime Minister Vajpayee. Defence Minister George Fernandes was the only non-BJP member of the CCS. Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was a former warrior, strategic commentator and author. Home Minister LK Advani was reputed to be the hawk. India's intention was to get Pakistan to change its behaviour on CBT which was inflicting heavy casualties on the Indian Army. The right to self-defence under UN Charter and the 9/11 attacks in US provided both the justification and environment for retribution. The international focus on India's coercive diplomacy – threat of use of force – got distorted to fear of a nuclear crisis which was largely manipulated by US and the international media. An internal cost-benefit analysis was never done to draw up an instructive guide to future India-Pakistan crises. The rediscovery of use of force after 1971, even though stand-off during Operation Sindoor will stimulate innovative ideas on coercive diplomacy, deterrence, escalation dominance and nuclear risk management. Institutional memory to recall relevant aspects of Operation Parakram during Operation Sindoor was missing.

The contents of this paper are personal views of the author. The contents, therefore may not be quoted or cited as representing the views or policy of Government of India, or the Ministry of Defence (MoD), or the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS).

## Preface

The war over J&K is unending. It started in 1947, on the morrow of gaining independence, and has not ceased since partition and the birth of Pakistan. It is unlikely to stop even after three full fledged wars, many skirmishes and several 'brink of war' situations. Speaking on Kashmir Solidarity Day on 5 February 2025 at Muzaffarabad, the Pakistan Army Chief, General Asim Munir said: "Pakistan has already fought three wars over Kashmir; if ten more wars are required, Pakistan will fight them". Later, on 17 April 2025, he called Kashmir Pakistan's 'jugular vein' and vowed never to abandon Kashmiris in their heroic struggle against 'Indian occupation'. Then on 22 April 2025 Pahalgam happened followed inevitably by Operation Sindoor. The doyen of India-Pakistan relations, late Stephen Cohen said: "they will fight a hundred years". Both countries have suffered immense economic loss which has also proved a setback to the region and deepened roots of hate and violence. Unfortunately, during this time, dialogue has not been given a proper chance and spoilers have ruled the roost. The most consequential terrorist attack was on 13 December 2001, against India's Parliament by Pakistan's Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). India's response to it was Operation Parakram.

Had Operation Parakram (2001-02) been executed, it would have been the first time that India would have initiated operations leading to war against Pakistan. That is why, the book I had intended to write titled – Operation Parakram: the War that Never Was did not see light of day. Parakram was singularly the most complete and longest peace time deployment – 15 December 2001 to 16 October 2002. I carried out the most comprehensive research possible in potentially war time and my sources were in most cases, the horse's mouth. These were COAS Gen S Padmanabhan, succeeded by Gen Nirmal Vij in September 2002 who was VCOAS; CNS Admiral Sushil Kumar, later succeeded by Admiral



Madhvendra Singh; Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal AY Tipnis succeeded by Air Chief Marshal Krishnaswamy; DGM Lt Gen Sarabjit Chahal Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh; Defence Minister George Fernandes; National Security Advisor Brijesh Mishra; US Ambassador Robert Blackwill; and his political advisor Ashley Tellis.

I interviewed these persons except the Air Chiefs both during and after the crisis. For example, I met Gen Padmanabhan in Chennai soon after he had retired and Mr. Blackwill in Tel Aviv during a conference in 2012. I met in India and abroad, other experts who were also researching Operation Parakram. Two prominent are Peter Lavoy, an American who alternated between the US State Department and different think tanks; and Steve Coll the Pulitzer prize author who wrote exclusive pieces on the 2001-2 crisis; and the peace process that followed in The New Yorker magazine. He had interviewed me for the first article. Mr. Blackwill used to organise round table dinners at his residence at least twice a week for several weeks to discuss the crisis and I was a frequent invitee to them.

This paper is deficient of the full Pakistani version of the crisis which was called Operation Sabit Kadam. I sought permission from Pakistan High Commission for a visa to travel to Pakistan more than once but it never materialised even after my wife had met President Pervez Musharraf in Islamabad where she had gone for a conference courtesy East West Center, Hawaii. She told Musharraf that like him, I too was an RCDS, London graduate but even that did not work for the visa. The Pakistan High Commissioner, Aziz Khan advised me to wait till India-Pakistan relations improved. We're still waiting for that to happen. The Pakistan account of the crisis is therefore minimal and also the reason for the book not yet materialising.

I presented Operation Parakram in different shapes at Defence Services Staff College Wellington, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, Observer Research Foundation, Delhi and Centre for Air Power Studies, Delhi. My friend late Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, the founder Director of CAPS and formerly Director IDSA for more than a decade – we were colleagues at DSSC – took a very keen interest in the trajectory Op Parakram; as the leading Indian strategist of his time we discussed its progress during and after it. Completion of the study was delayed for several reasons but its relevance to contemporary strategic literature has not been lost. On the other hand it has been pitted against more recent events like the surgical strikes at Uri 2016, air strikes in Balakot Operation Bandar in 2019 - and the stand-off Operation Sindoor following the Pahalgam carnage in April 2025, not to mention the episodic high value terror attacks earlier. Some of these kinetic options were considered during Operation Parakram and one executed several times but covertly.

Jaswant Singh was my course mate and we were more than good friends till his tragic demise recently. As foreign minister – also briefly defence minister when George Fernandes had to step down – he was very stingy about parting with information. But out of office, he was more forthcoming. I got to know George Saab who shared privileged information but bulk of the Army information was provided by Generals Padmanabhan, Chahal and Vij.

For additional views on Operation Parakram relevant papers in the undermentioned books and the solitary exclusive book on it are recommended:

- a. Fearful Symmetry by Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty (2005) The 2001-2 Indo-Pakistan Crisis, Exposing Limits of Coercive Diplomacy.

- b. Four Crises and A Peace Process: PR Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema and Stephen Cohen (2005)
- c. 10 Flash Points in 20 Years Manish Tewari (2021)
- d. Operation Parakram - The War Unfinished: VK Sood and Pravin Sawhney (2003)

In the Cabinet Committee for Security at the time, hawks and doves were arrayed equally. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee wished to create his legacy as the one who repaired India-Pakistan relations and brought peace to the region. He was against the idea of waging war but once he wavered briefly. Home Minister LK Advani was a clear votary of teaching Pakistan a lesson; Defence Minister George Fernandes was not a pacifist but chose his options with care and would generally go with the majority as he was the only non-BJP member of CCS. He may have been a fence-sitter of sorts. Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha would go along with Advani. NSA Brijesh Mishra, though not a member of CCS was both a powerful and influential former diplomat; Vajpayee's eyes and ears and his confidante, who was prepared to advise wielding the stick. But it was Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, a former Cavalry officer, who proved to be the decisive dissuasive voice, a spoke in the wheel for the execution of Parakram whose frequent use of strategic restraint hid his fear of the lack of readiness on part of the Army. He was close to Vajpayee and Fernandes. He was opposed to military action arguing that the Indian Army in particular and IAF in general were not properly equipped and prepared for war.

In the end, Vajpayee, who spoke about 'aar paar ka yudh' (decisive war) after the Kaluchak attack in May 2002 was sufficiently softened including by the Americans who became key players in cooling tempers and dissuading the Indian leadership from going to war. They succeeded in dampening the coercive

instincts of the CCS. But when mobilisation was ordered on 15 December, no one could tell there would be no war. Sepoy Atul Pandey, a serving ASC driver, told me on 20 December: 'bahut ho gaya. Iska mooh-tod jawab hona chahiye' (enough is enough, a befitting reply must be given). Pandey had not heard about Jaswant Singh. An article in a Gurgaon newspaper of 2005 encapsulated Operation Parakram declaring winners and losers.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is dedicated to founder and Director of CAPS late Air Commodore Jasjit Singh.

## Synopsis

- In 2002, India embarked on a difficult and complex exercise of coercive strategy with the implicit threat of use of force against Pakistan.
- The objective was to get Pakistan to change its policy on Jihad and stop Cross Border Terrorism (CBT). Also, to get out of the straitjacket of doing nothing and exercising strategic constraint and prolonged patience.
- The justification for punitive action was the attack on Indian Parliament. It gave India the opportunity to tell the world – enough is enough. India would put Pakistan as well as international community on notice.
- The environment for offensive action was favourable. It was post 9/11; and right signals were coming from US President George Bush who said “every country has right of self defence”. There was also the precedent of US active assistance earlier during Kargil.
- On use of force by India the playbook contained two theories:
  - a. That India was bluffing/play-acting. There was no intention of going to war.

- b. That India was dead serious, though war was an option of last resort as India did not want war. But neither did Pakistan and least of all the US.

The outcome:

- a) Parakram was not fully tested but India came pretty close to war, missing the chance for a punitive response that the Army had dearly sought.
- b) The crisis eventually shifted international focus from prospect of war to preventing a nuclear crisis.
- c) US achieved its objective of preventing war by talking India out of it.
- d) Coercive diplomacy was only marginally successful as the end game had not been visualised due to lack of political will and conflicting Indian and US objectives.
- e) There were some gains: the 2003 ceasefire and start of a political process – the productive backchannel with Pakistan that came closest to resolving the Kashmir dispute.
- f) US took credit for averting nuclear war as it did for defusing the Brass Tacks crisis in early 1987 and all other crises since and before including Op Sindoor.

## Introduction

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that diplomacy works best when backed by force. Operation Parakram, the code name for the military deployment and the threat of use of force was in support of the coercive strategy of compellence. It had three strands: diplomacy, conventional military force and nuclear escalation.

During the Kargil skirmish, while military was in the lead, diplomacy played a support role. In Parakram, military deployment was designed to back diplomacy. During Kargil, the decision of not crossing the LoC was made public ab initio. This time around the intention on use of force was kept open till the end. India's coercive strategy was aimed not just at Pakistan but also the US.

The most heinous terrorist attack against the Indian state was the assault on Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001. The attack on Parliament was one of the highest thresholds of a terrorist attack. This daring assault was preceded by targeting of the J&K State Assembly on 1 October 2001. India had to inform the world and Pakistan in particular that it had crossed the red line. The cumulative effect of these provocations led to the largest and longest ever military deployment on the western borders starting 15 December 2001. The gravity of the event was evident from the national resolve expressed after meeting of the cabinet and the CCS on 13 December 2001. The mood in the country, particularly among the armed forces, especially the army which was facing the brunt of the 15-year long proxy war, was one of profound anger, demanding quick retribution. The cry for revenge resonated in the country. People, already amazed at the country's unflattering record of restraint and patience, were growing restless. The terrorist attack led to Operation Parakram. On 14 May 2002, terrorists struck again in Kaluchak, Jammu against a Army barracks, housing families of soldiers, killing 16 ladies and 8 children. This added 'fuel to the fire' and pushed the country to the brink of war. The attacks on Parliament and Kaluchak constituted the two spikes. The nation was strongly in favour of India responding swiftly to teach Pakistan a lesson.<sup>2</sup>

The military confrontation was unique. Despite the long gestation period, there was no war. Never before have troops been deployed for so long with intention to go to war and then being withdrawn without almost not firing a shot. In 1947, the war with Pakistan lasted 18 months, in 1965 it was 16 days and in 1971, 13 days. This time, for not a single day. International concerns of a nuclear war had closed the window for conventional conflict. After 1998, an all-out war between two nuclear armed states had become inconceivable. Even in a limited conventional engagement, neither side had the military superiority to win a decisive victory. India had got locked between a situation of no war and doing nothing despite a Parliamentary resolution in 1994 to retake PoK. The overall balance of military strength gauged at the time between India and Pakistan was 1.2 to 1. In 1971 it was 1.7 to 1 in India's favour. India's main strength lay not in the mountains of J&K but in the plains of Punjab and deserts of Rajasthan.

Operation Parakram had two faces. One, mobilisation and deployment – the threat in being; and the other, potential for the act of going to war. The hope lay in Sun Tzu's dictum of 'winning the war without fighting any battle'.

The study examines why coercive strategy did not succeed and why Parakram was not given a fuller chance. Rather, why India did not go to war. Parakram also covers some operations and actions of IAF and IN. Relevant lessons germane to this study of later terrorist attacks have been added.

## **Provocation for War**

The immediate provocation for the mobilisation was attack on Parliament, 12/13 December while the Kaluchak attack five months later was a dangerous defiance. India, not crossing LoC in 1999, had emboldened Pakistan to step up CBT. The attack on Parliament was taken very seriously by India. The five

Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorists could have wiped out India's political leadership and democracy. It was providential that terrorist's vehicle hit the Vice President's car and security guards were alerted immediately. Terrorists had reached the main entrance of Parliament and through it, could have reached the Prime Minister and Home Minister's offices. One of the terrorists was a human bomber and the Ambassador car in which they came was packed with explosives. The encounter was over in 12 minutes 30 seconds.<sup>3</sup>

Pakistan's proxy war had taken a toll of 29,160 persons in J&K up to January 2003 over the preceding 12 years. The Pakistani casualties for this period were claimed to be 80,000 personnel. Of the 12,406 Indian civilians killed during the period, 11,000 were Muslims. In addition, as many as 21,746 civilians and security force personnel were injured. Those killed in CBT in the last 12 years comprised 12,406 civilians, 3104 security forces and 13,609 militants. Of these, 2150 were foreign mercenaries, mostly Pakistanis and Afghans. On an average, 2100 terrorists were being slain annually. In the Indian Army, nearly 20 soldiers, 0.5 JCOs and 1.7 officers were getting killed in counterterrorist operations in J&K every month. This was akin to fighting one Kargil every 16 months. These were grim statistics.

## **Preparation for War**

The military deployment was a key component of India's coercive diplomacy. When Parliament was struck by terrorists, COAS Gen Padmanabhan, was in Chennai. It was his Vice Chief, General Vij, who attended the initial briefings. The government did not invoke the Union War Book which created certain difficulties. Civil Defence agencies were also therefore not activated. Mobilisation was ordered on 15 December without the traditional Warning call and by 8 January the deployment and strategic



relocation was deemed complete. The deployment was not ordered by CCS. Nearly 700,000 armed forces personnel had been deployed at 100 percent readiness for war which included laying of Priority one minefields. The problems of shortages – spares, serviceability, and holding of equipment – remained. The overall readiness situation improved by May. There were other difficulties due to Zero Warning. As there was no Warning phase, mobilisation was ordered from cold start. Problems relating to rolling stock, adequate sidings, infrastructure, bridge classification, direct inward dialing, connectivity and urbanisation of concentration areas were not foreseen. Intelligence during mobilisation and integration with paramilitary forces were inadequate. Total deployment was criticized by those who had advocated calibrated deployment but preventive deployment was necessary for surgical strikes by IAF.

All peacetime activities were suspended. Only NDC and CDM courses were running. DSSC course was truncated and made by nomination. NCC officers were mobilised. It took 20 days to get ready for war – time sufficient for US to hold India back. The Army Chief visited troops in forward areas on 1 January 2002 and alerted them for the showdown. It was a kind of ‘now or never’ exhortation. Shortages and deficiencies of critical military equipment were made up and crash procurement was done. The Eastern Naval Fleet was relocated in the west. So were the air assets repositioned.

IAF assets were relocated from east to west even prior to 9/11 for three to four months. The exercise was repeated after 12/13 December. This caused considerable attrition on serviceability of aircraft. Both the spares position and serviceability had improved by April largely due to Russian and Israeli help. Both the Army and Air Force were de-alerted in February-March but personnel had to be recalled from leave in May after Kaluchak.

Clearly developments between December 13 and May-June 2002 represented a military crisis including a significant nuclear dimension which was described by India as an artificial nuclear crisis and by Pakistan and the international community as a nuclear crisis. This was preventive deterrence by the West. Such a massive enterprise had domestic, regional and global ramifications.

### **Political Objective, Military Options and Overall Strategy**

India started with the limited political objective of curbing the proxy war and ending cross border terrorism. Crushing Pakistan militarily or the dismemberment of Pakistan was never a realistic objective. The aim was to make Pakistan change its policy of Jihad without going to war and to internationalise its complicity in cross border terrorism (CBT) and lowering the nuclear threshold. If that did not work, to precipitate military action.

There was no formal directive by the government to the Chiefs of Staff Committee on likely political and military objectives though presentations on range of options were made by the military to the Cabinet Committee on Security. When COSC asked for them it was told that operational directive would be provided after mobilisation was completed, but it never materialised.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, only informal and necessarily inadequate joint planning on the nature of war, operational contingencies and objectives was done. Most of the briefings were held in the Army operations room. The briefings for the CCS were done in broad terms as the Chief of Army Staff was paranoid about security as there were too many hangers on. Some briefings were done for just the Prime Minister by the COAS and DGMO. There was no fourth person.<sup>5</sup>

Mobilisation was intended to back diplomacy and if necessary resort to war. Therefore, the threat had to be credible enough to make Pakistan change its policy of Jihad preferably without going to war. The idea was also to locate the space for cross border

military operations which had been seemingly dimmed after the nuclear tests and provided Pakistan the apparent impunity for CBT. Kargil had shown this space was there and that political will and operational capabilities were required to exploit it.

After 1971, India has scrupulously respected the sanctity of LOC. Pakistan on the other hand, has done everything to undermine it. Our not crossing the LoC in 1999 emboldened Pakistan to raise the ante. India had not fought a war since 1971 and the military balance with Pakistan had changed from 1.7 to 1 in 1971 to 1.2 to 1 in 2002 though in the case of the IAF this was higher. India was seen to be stronger in the IB sector than in PoK. In January 2002, Pakistan's 11 and 12 Corps were deployed in the west against Afghanistan in support of US Operation Freedom. In addition, 300 Army officers were seconded to Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) of Pakistan and had not been reverted.

The military objectives reviewed and available were:

- destroy terrorist infrastructure and training camps in PoK
- retake parts of PoK that would curb CBT
- attrition of Pakistan's military machine
- destruction of economic targets
- containment of Pakistan through sustained deployment
- raising costs for Pakistan for CBT

Abrogating the Indus Water Treaty was considered but rejected to demonstrate India's respect for international treaties as well as due to its unknown potential for hurting Pakistan and own capacity for accommodating surplus waters. This dilemma was experienced later also during acts of terrorism but no call was taken until the Pahalgam massacre.

## Overall Strategy

The strategy comprised of four elements and one assumption. The ingredients were:

- Use of coercive diplomacy for achieving political and military objective of making Pakistan change its policy on Jihad and dismantling terrorist infrastructure.
- Mobilisation and deployment – Operation Parakram – was the threat in being for backing coercive diplomacy and for containment of Pakistan.
- Use of force was instrument of last resort after all other options had been exhausted.
- Coercive strategy had to be credible and warlike. But political will for staying on course was paramount. The quick response in ordering deployment reflected political will. But delay in operational readiness of 20 days had lost surprise.

The crucial assumption was made that US would cooperate in meeting India's political objective for ending CBT. The signals that initially came out of US Embassy Delhi and Washington were very encouraging. US President George Bush had stated: 'every country has the right to defend itself'. But Afghanistan had changed US priorities. Unfortunately, India did not have a Plan B if its assumption was wrong. Especially when it became clear that the US was determined to prevent war and that it was either unwilling or unable to rein in Pakistan. The key to the success of this strategy therefore lay not in the immediate use of force but in India maintaining the threat credibly without any time line. Indian resolve had to be read both by Pakistan and the international community.

While Pakistan's strategy was to resist coercion, avoid war and lower the nuclear threshold, US strategy was to avoid war and manage status quo to reverse the crisis. Interestingly, India too did not want war. That the US would help India meet its political objectives was a bad assumption as US was to act only its own national interest, which at the time, in the region was two-fold: to manage the status quo over Kashmir and avoid military conflict that could escalate to the nuclear threshold and interfere with US war in Afghanistan.

## Six Strike Opportunities

Altogether, six opportunities were on the table for responding to Pakistan's CBT. Two of these were before 13 December 2001 – that is before the attack on Delhi's Parliament. These fall in the pre 9/11 and post 9/11 as also pre 12/13 December category. This shows India's restlessness to break out of the no-action rut; the strategic stalemate that existed even before 12/13 December induced by the tit-for-tat Pokhran and Chagai nuclear tests. The six strike opportunities were:

- Pre 9/11 (pre-Parakram)
- Post 9/11 (pre Parakram)
- 15 and 18 December 2001
- 9 January 2002
- 9 June 2002
- Mid-September to mid-October 2002.

The Army had sought four weeks for military operations. It was told the maximum it could expect was two weeks. This was reduced further to seven days. Briefings of different contingencies were done for CCS. But for reasons of security, details were not given out. Questions were seldom asked. The final briefing for the

9 June plan held in the RM's office got leaked to the press. Thereafter, only word of mouth briefings were done at the Army Commanders level in Delhi. The nuclear aspects were not discussed with field commanders. The Army did its own nuclear wargaming but this was not transmitted down chain of command. The Army had been planning to do a general nuclear briefing for select Members of Parliament and the CCS. But this never happened. In the absence of a Chief of Defence Staff, much of the planning was compartmentalised and some of it for security reasons too.

Service Chiefs were shown the nuclear core/weapon and the triggers located separately. These were at six places and were being relocated at three.

### **Operational Plans**

A macro-view each of these strike plans:

#### **Pre-9/11**

The offensive was to be launched in PoK under cover of UN Article 51, right of self defence. The military plan involved use of 6 and 27 Mountain Division which were trained in Ranikhet hills. Surgical strikes were an essential element of the plan. The Army's financial powers were enhanced to Rs 200 crore from Rs 20 crore. IAF plan was presented to RM.

#### **Post 9/11**

This plan was more ambitious but the offensive was restricted to PoK. As it was designed to make LoC more defensible, it involved occupation of Leepa valley and Bugina Bulge/ Kishanganga. Heliborne operations were planned to disrupt Skardu Airbase. IAF was on call for improving the Border Defensive Posture – new name for making LOC more defensible.

## Air strikes on 15 or 18 December 2002

These attacks were intended to be instant retribution for 12/13 December and were also confined to PoK. The plan was discussed at a meeting in RM's office on 14 December. Surgical strikes were to be launched in two phases: Phase 2 only after evaluating Pakistan reaction to Phase 1. It is believed that the IAF sought more time to verify intelligence data on terrorist infrastructure and camps. Similarly, the Army also wanted more time so that preventive deployment could be completed. The PM's reaction to the plan was about likely escalation. He is believed to have said during the briefing for him: "Pervez Musharraf pagal hai. Yudh ho sakta hai" (Pervez Musharraf is mad. It could lead to war)<sup>6</sup>. Former Air Chief ACM Krishnaswamy confirmed this; saying air strikes at Bahawalpur and deploying the Navy for blockade of Karachi were declined<sup>7</sup>. The briefing on 18 December was done by CAS and COAS for PM and NSA.

## 9 January 2002

Land offensive on 9 January was planned to be launched across LoC and IB though the NSA favoured operations across LoC (PoK only). This was a close call to war. US intelligence estimated that only surgical strikes would take place. The offensive plan contained one key advantage: bulk of Pakistan's 11 and 12 Corps was still deployed on the Durand Line and Pakistan's military was judged to being off -balance as at least 300 Lt Cols and below rank officers had been seconded to Water and Power Development Authority.

Force levels earmarked for the big offensive are not available. Stimson Center (US) had estimated that by end December 2001, 6 and 27 Mountain Divisions had been moved back but sufficient formations were still available. The offensive did not come about due to active US counselling and Musharraf's 12 January conciliatory speech promising to end cross border terrorism. Amb

Blackwill was going around South Block saying: Wait for Musharraf's speech.

### 9 June 2002

A tough Indian response was expected after the second spike, the terrorist attack against Army barracks housing families of soldiers on 14 May at Kaluchak, Jammu. The field was wide open for retribution in IB and/ or PoK. US believed that 9 June was real D-Day. On 6 June, final briefing was done by three Chiefs in RM's office where George Fernandes and Jaswant Singh were present. News of the briefing got leaked to the press. All three strike corps were deployed in the south and this sent off alarm bells and panic in Pakistan. Of course, this wasn't the wisest operational move. US shuttle diplomacy was intense and at its peak - between Washington, Islamabad and Delhi. US Secretary of State Gen Colin Powell, US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, NSA Condoleezza Rice in US and US Ambassador Blackwill in Delhi were fire-fighting the short-fuse operation pleading as in January to wait, seeking 'more time' and citing Musharraf's speeches on 12 January and 27 May about ending CBT. Armitage arrived in Delhi on 6 June with a message from Musharraf that promised to end infiltration 'permanently, visibly, irreversibly and to the satisfaction of India'. This message was too perfect to be entirely true. Blackwill had hinted several times that Musharraf's two speeches were scripted/ edited in US State Department.

On 27 May, Defence Minister George Fernandes hosted a sit-down dinner for his Kenyan counterpart at Hotel Le Meridien, New Delhi. The three service chiefs were present and I was also invited. All of us including George Fernandes listened to Musharraf's speech in which he was regretful though not apologetic about CBT which he promised to curtail/ stop. At the end of the dinner, Gen Padmanabhan told the RM: "the window for action is closing". On



9 June, India was very close to crossing the IB, a fear US was able to squash.

## September/October 2002

Gen Padmanabhan called this the last hope for punishing Pakistan's military. It envisaged Gen Musharraf starting a skirmish almost ten months into Operation Parakram. In his briefing to PM, COAS told him: "I know you won't let me go across" but "Musharraf may oblige" adding "once I am inside, even if you call me back, I will say 'you're not audible'". This anecdote was narrated to me by COAS illustrating his forlorn hope for revenge for Pakistan's CBT.<sup>8</sup>

## Comparing 9 January and 9 June as Possible D-Days

Both 9 January and 9 June were dates when it wasn't just a case of coercive diplomacy but being on brink of war. NSA Brajesh Mishra has admitted in an interview to BBC Walk the Talk that India was very close to war on at least two occasions. He told me that "we were more close in going to war in May-June than in January". The operational plans for both these contingencies was across the Line of Control as well as the International Border.

By 9 June surprise had been lost completely. But this followed the second spike at Kaluchak. Pakistan by then had considerably strengthened PoK by moving forces from the west. On balance, 9 January appeared to be a close thing and a missed opportunity; but it was in June that India seemed closest to war. This was also the US perception. A choice had to be made which of the military options would be more cost effective and yield desired results.

The Indian Navy had a plan for an amphibious assault by 91 Amphibious Brigade on 14 February 2002 against Gwadar Port as on that day weather conditions were favourable. But the plan was not presented to the CCS.

The military, especially the Army was convinced that a short duration limited war was possible below the nuclear threshold after leaving just about three Divisions and one Bofors Regiment in the East. Almost the entire Army, the largest force ever assembled, was deployed against Pakistan. A phantom 17 Corps was also raised and deployed in Southern Command. The Army was keen to take on Pakistan as it was known that Pakistan's military inventory would be enhanced with 400 new artillery guns and several regiments of T-80 tanks by 2003. Indian military planners had also acknowledged Pakistan's superiority in night-fighting capability with tanks, helicopters and self-propelled guns. This capability enhancement was confirmed.

On the Indian side, at least three Indian T-90 regiments were operational – two by the first week of January and three by June 2002. India's military superiority across the IB in the military's own mind was never in doubt. The difficulty of securing any impressive gains in the mountains of J&K (PoK) was well known and time tested. That is why operations in the IB sector were essential and preferred. PoK was disputed territory and legitimate for capture as per the parliamentary resolution of 1994.

The fact that India chose not to go to war was more due to geostrategic constraints, less on account of limitations of military capability or the nuclear flashpoint theory that had already been negatively tested in Kargil. But in the minds of the majority in CCS, the military was not fully equipped for achieving decisive results. On the credibility of India's threat to go to war, one has to only go back to the US's shuttle diplomacy in January and June that year, urging India to give more time to Pakistan – and the US – to act to comply with its demands. The US travel advisory was the clearest indication how seriously the US took the threat of war. In the end it was an authorised, not an ordered departure for its staff. US concern was for 60,000 US citizens in India and another 20,000 US

tourists at the time. US, UK, Japan, EU and others took the war option very seriously especially after the foreign media had reported that in case of a nuclear exchange, 12 million people would be killed in India and Pakistan and another 7 million affected. This was headline news in British newspapers and US media.

## **How Close was India to War?**

The assessment on this has varied from ‘never that close’ to ‘very close’. Here is mainly the Indian perception of the proximity to war at the time. These views were culled from research and dialogue with civil and military policymakers.

Barring a few, bulk of the higher command and all of the rank and file in the Indian Army were convinced that they would go to war - at least that was the conviction till 9 January 2002 initially and later up to 9 June 2002. A substantially credible war tempo had been built up, invoking the country’s dignity and the Army’s self-respect and honour. This kind of fervour and motivation had not been seen since 1971. Strategic constraint became repugnant to many in the forces.

Planning and briefing started even before 9/11. There were no written or oral military objectives provided except those presented by the three services. 30 to 35 CCS meetings were held mostly in Panchavati, 7 RCR. Of these, 4 to 5 were organised in the Army Operations Room and one or two exclusively for PM by Army Chief and DGMO. Military objectives were determined by Pakistan’s perceived red lines which were higher in PoK and lower in IB sector. There was some confusion about intelligence over location of terrorist camps between Army and IAF while considering air strikes. The CCS format was that it would meet before the military was called in. The PM hardly spoke but when he did, no one went against him. Nuclear escalation and its

management was left to the CCS. The Army was paranoid about information leaks during briefings for CCS. COAS selectively and individually briefed his Army/ Corps commanders.

## Why India Did Not Go To War

In the Army's Operations Room, during the briefings for the CCS, a prominent display would go up – "Operations will not be stopped till objectives are achieved".<sup>8</sup>

It seems the government could not convince itself that military actions of war either in PoK or across IB or both, least of all, surgical strikes by IAF, would achieve the political objective of ending CBT. The argument went that the costs and risks of waging war would outweigh the gains of such a war. The protagonists of war however urged that the failure to respond would show that India did not have the stomach to take hard decisions. Already in the West, military experts were both marveling and mystified by India's record of strategic restraint. Military action was needed to restore the country's honour and dignity. The country had been crying wolf for too long.

India's coercive strategy was based on one key assumption: that the US would act as a force multiplier in helping end CBT. This was flawed. At no time, had India asked the US how far it would be willing to go in its support. Further, no one apparently asked even after the 27 May speech whether the US was acting as a messenger of the Musharraf pledge, or its guarantor. Robert Blackwill, did at one stage, clarify that US was merely conveying to India the pledge made by Musharraf to the US on ending CBT permanently. This was a nuanced shift from his earlier statement that the US was making Musharraf end CBT which was a credible assurance. After all, the US had choreographed even scripted the Musharraf speeches of 12 January and 27 May. On 8 January at one of his

legendary round table dinners, Blackwill said: “wait for Musharraf’s speech”.

The US objective was to prevent the outbreak of war at all costs as this would undercut its ongoing war against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Further, Pakistan troops deployed on Durand Line would get relocated to the Eastern Front.

The reasons that constrained India from taking recourse to war were:

- Presence of US troops in Pakistan and its war in Afghanistan. It was in US legitimate national interest to prevent war in South Asia.
- US counsel of restraint was to avert the nuclear flashpoint.
- US interlocutors were constantly suggesting that military action against Pakistan would not end CBT. This was dovetailed with their own objective of preventing war. Their interlocutors sought ‘more time’ for influencing Musharraf in complying with Indian demands. ‘Give Pakistan more time’ became euphemism for giving US more time to act on Pakistan. Blackwill would say ‘give us two more days’ – that was the plea he made on 8 January. D-Day was 9 January. The Musharraf speeches of 12 January and 27 May were designed to comfort India on its CBT concerns. Richard Armitage’s mission to Delhi on 6/7 June carrying the Musharraf promises/pledges and Colin Powell’s message that Musharraf ‘had told us he would end terrorism permanently, visibly, irreversibly and to the satisfaction of India’ were part of the reassurance package. The difference between 12 January and 27 May was that while the first was a general statement of intent, the second read with the earlier pledge contained specific assurances.

US diplomacy in conflict management was intense. Powell is known to have made 83 phone calls to different member of the CCS between December 2001 and October 2002.

- India did not wish to damage growing US-India relations.
- Once the D-Days of 9 January and 9 June had passed, India chose to check and test whether Musharraf's words were being converted into deeds on the ground. This verification began after 12 January and 27 May. Both India and Pakistan needed time—India for verification and Pakistan for compliance. It was difficult to verify the 12 January pledge due to snow conditions along the LoC. But after 27 May, infiltration actually fell by 53 percent. This was also confirmed through radio intercepts. After both these pledges, infiltration did decline temporarily. But it was revived later. Between 27 May and mid-June, only one attempt at infiltration was reported while for the corresponding period the previous year there had been 30 infiltration bids.
- Elections in UP and Punjab and the Amarnath pilgrimage acted as a distraction to the military deployment.
- Gujarat riots in 2002 opened a second front temporarily. One division had to be diverted there.
- US, UK, EU and Japan, issued travel advisories in end May and early June 2002. These were perceived as acts of coercive diplomacy in reverse to prevent a war. The foreign media had reported: "Foreigners Flee India as Threat of Nuclear War Looms".
- A surfeit of confusing and conflicting war rhetoric by Indian leaders like 'aar paar ki ladaï'; 'there will be no

war'; 'we wish we'd gone to war', shifted the focus from CBT to nuclear war and at times, to no war. The operational utility of deployment expired when George Fernandes indicated in end-June that troops would not be withdrawn till October. This was linked to elections in J&K which it was said would be postponed to January 2003, but troop deployment enabled incident-free elections on time in J&K.

- As strategic surprise was lost, deployment fatigue was bringing diminishing returns while military operations at this late stage appeared improbable.
- The nuclear factor proved greatest inhibitor to prospects of war.

Keeping the big picture in mind, the government was not as convinced as the military about the utility of going to war. Even amongst the latter, it was the Army that was 'thumping the table' because it was the one that was at the receiving end of Pakistan's proxy war. The option for war was open till June.

In the end, the only war that was fought was in end-May on the Indian side of the LoC. It was at Point 3260 in Machhal sector at Lunda post where Pakistani troops had ingressed. IAF Mirage aircraft carried out precision strikes to get the post vacated. The narrative of this action is worth recounting. At the time, Gen Pervez Musharraf was flying to China. He called Colin Powell who was flying to attend a meeting of the APEC in Singapore on 31 May-1 June. Musharraf told him that India had declared war. But India had taken abundant precaution in informing the Americans in Delhi 24 hours in advance of the contemplated action at Lunda. In addition, Indian forces improved their domination on LoC in the Kargil sector by occupying at least one new post and removing several Pakistani direct firing weapons and observation posts

overlooking the Kargil-Leh highway. In addition, at least two Pakistan Ranger border posts were destroyed in Fazilka and one in Rajasthan sector.

## Coercive Diplomacy

India is fairly adept if not proficient in the use of coercive diplomacy as a tool for achieving its objectives and national interest. Coercion has been practiced in the neighbourhood in Sri Lanka and Nepal with limited success but has failed in Pakistan. To be effective, a degree of deterrence must accompany coercive diplomacy. Against CBT from Pakistan and Bangladesh, it had been singularly unsuccessful. Pakistan's repeated provocations and acts of terrorism in J&K had gone undeterred even after Uri surgical strikes in PoK and the unprecedented air strikes at Balakot in Pakistan. India has either been self deterred or deterred by the nuclear overhang. It has not succeeded in locating adequate space for substantive conventional retribution below the nuclear threshold to punish Pakistan. India's recent punitive actions across LOC/IB are somewhat akin to Israel's periodic 'mowing the grass' in its neighbourhood that has exploded into the multi-front war Israel has been waging, especially in Gaza. India, which seemed stuck on the learning curve, has broken out of it in the aftermath of the Pahalgam massacre by employing stand-off air attack weapons targeting terrorist hideouts with missiles and drones and changed the rules of engagement during Operation Sindoor that prevented Pakistan from lowering the nuclear threshold.<sup>9</sup>

Diplomacy is the art of bargaining and posturing with the implied power to hurt the adversary. Deterrence, compellence and blackmail are means to that end. Compellence is strategic coercion to influence adversary behaviour. Coercion can be applied either through deterrence that is passive (don't do what you're doing) or compellence: enforced action (do this). The travel advisory issued



by US, UK and others in end May 2002 was also deterrence. Pakistan's compliance of US demands after 9/11 was compellence. The dispatch by US of USS Enterprise, nuclear aircraft carrier into the Bay of Bengal in 1971 was failed coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy stops short of war and is crisis-making and brinkmanship. Use of force is weapon of last resort only when threats and other diplomatic steps have been insufficient or not succeeded. The transition from threat to force is incremental and calibrated, that is, surgical strikes, limited operations to all-out war.

Compliance is facilitated if there is a reward or quid pro quo (you stop CBT, dialogue process can restart). In the Cuban missile crisis, both sides removed missiles threatening the other. So coercive diplomacy works between nuclear adversaries also. It works best between a strong and weak country. But exception is North Korea with nuclear weapons and non-state actors. In the case of two near-equally matched countries, external pressures are necessary to secure compliance and if that works to defuse the crisis.

India's initial demands set on 14 December 2001 were limited to:

- a. Termination of activities of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) including detention of its leaders.
- b. Sealing their offices and blocking access to funds.

But these were later expanded to

- a. Handover of 20 most-wanted criminals residing in Pakistan.
- b. Stopping of CBT.
- c. Closure of terrorist facilities and dismantling infrastructure.

- d. A categorical and unambiguous renunciation of terror in all its manifestations.

The initial and subsequent demands were met partially: sealing of offices, arrest of leaders and temporary dismantling of infrastructure and reduction of infiltration. US was the first to take action against LeT and JeM by freezing their accounts and putting them onto the FTO list. Pakistan complied with India's demands partially including the public undertaking not permitting terrorism in the name of Kashmir from within its territory. In October 2002, US named Dawood Ibrahim as a global terrorist.

Coercion like deterrence, has rules of engagement, negotiation and communication. The bottom line is who is coercing whom. Recall Pervez Musharraf's post 9/11, 20 Sept speech accepting all seven US demands. This was US coercion of Pakistan.

Recall also Pervez Musharraf's quip after the war had started in Afghanistan on 8 October 2001 that India is not US, Pakistan is not Taliban and therefore India should 'lay off' implying that India should desist from opening Pakistan's Eastern front.

US is the dominant power that has exercised coercion and ensured escalation control in J&K. The history of external intervention in J&K began as early as 1961 with US mediation over it. Since then, no India-Pakistan crisis has escaped US intervention, a softer form of coercive diplomacy which sharpened after both sides acquired nuclear capability. Not for nothing did US call J&K the 'most dangerous place on earth' and a 'nuclear flashpoint'. This crisis management is to prevent escalation that could lead to dynamic targeting – movement and deployment of nuclear capable weapons.

The Indian Army conducted effective military diplomacy during the crisis in Sierra Leone. The then DGMO, Lt Gen NC Vij,

travelled to US, UK, UN explaining the plight of 200 mainly Gorkha soldiers besieged for five months by the RUF rebels and the need for diplomacy to end the siege. As diplomacy by a joint MEA-MoD team had failed, the Indian Brigade in Sierra Leone was forced to unilaterally launch Operation Khukuri to free its soldiers after clearance by CCS.<sup>10</sup>

During Kargil, India's combined use of force and diplomacy worked by bringing the US and many other countries on board to support its force vacation of Pakistani aggression and nailing its wholesale violation of LoC.

In Parakram too, India tried to coerce a militarily near-equal and nuclear armed Pakistan to do its bidding.

India's coercive strategy was fairly sound though implementation was not so effective. India could not get the US over on its side as had been assumed. India had expected that the US would make Musharraf keep the pledges he had made on CBT. India unilaterally withdrew its armed forces on 16 October 2002 without achieving its stated objective of ending CBT. It passed on the decision of terminating Operation Parakram to the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) which had earlier advocated: either go for it or withdraw. Don't hang on. India also dropped its other unfulfilled demands on Pakistan.

The more recent example of coercive diplomacy is best illustrated by the Balakot air strikes on 26 February 2019 as retribution for Pulwama. To secure release of Wing Commander Abhinandan captured by Pakistan on night 28 February, "India threatened use of nine missiles against Pakistan". Later PM Modi called this 'qatl ki raat' during the election campaign for 2019 elections.<sup>11</sup> Abhinandan was released on 29 February due to coercive diplomacy through threat of use of missiles. The air strikes had apparently introduced a new deterrence regime against CBT.

The Pahalgam terrorist attack in April 2025 and its telling response in Operation Sindoor has reinforced deterrence. But diplomacy somewhat lagged behind with practically no active initiatives taken in the two weeks before the massive retribution and four days of the conflict. The conspicuous diplomatic stasis could not be compensated by post Op Sindoor high-powered outreach. It was too little too late.

## **Limited War and Escalation Control**

### **Limited War**

The view on limited war after Pokhran and Chagai among the Indian strategic affairs community was still sharply divided. The concept of limited war was the direct outcome of Pakistan's Kargil misadventure. It was authored by the then COAS, Gen VP Malik and endorsed by the Defence Minister, George Fernandes. Simply put, it argued that there is space for a short, sharp limited conventional war below the nuclear threshold. It recommended that India call Pakistan's nuclear bluff as there was adequate space in PoK for limited ground and air operations – a reverse Kargil – to deter CBT and raise the costs for Pakistan's proxy war. Some space was also available across the international border for causing attrition on Pakistan's military machine. These scenarios were war-gamed against Pakistan's perceived red lines, which were obviously higher in PoK than across the IB. One such scenario was war-gamed and results of attrition on both sides obtained. The figures for a seven-day engagement in the desert sector were: Attrition 30 percent; losses estimated on Pakistan side – 150 tanks, 150 artillery pieces and 60 aircraft. Indian casualties were 1500 killed and 25,000 wounded. Equipment loss figures were not available.

Former VCOAS Lt Gen Vir Vora in his paper posted on the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) Delhi website on 3

September 2003, noted that since neither India nor Pakistan had the requisite military superiority, even a limited war would be indecisive. Punitive air strikes would also not achieve the political objective and that negotiations, not military conflict, was the way out of the impasse. Vora's rationale has not blunted the zest of the votaries of limited war with Pakistan. But the question still lingers—how to keep limited war limited?

The satisfaction level of limited war against desired political objectives is however, lower than the military estimates made by the Army. But the issue of a limited war in a nuclear overhang, is still wide open even after Parakram failed to materialise. Pakistan had calibrated fighting its proxy war after India's raid in response to attack on Uri and surgical strikes at Balakot. Pahalgam may reflect strategic autonomy exercised by terrorists or more likely Pakistan upping the ante. Operation Sindoor has set new red lines for CBT that will extend longevity of deterrence which had broken down.

### **Escalation Control**

Could limited air strikes/land offensives in PoK have escalated? If India chose to restrict the war to PoK, would Pakistan have expanded the conflict to the IB? In India, the view was that this was both unlikely and improbable. Yet, Pakistan has made out a case for conflict escalation by lowering the nuclear threshold. Despite threatening to, in Indian mind, Pakistan was not expected to lower its nuclear threshold in response to a limited advance across the International Border due to risk of unacceptable nuclear retaliation. It is believed that the COAS in his briefing to the CCS had left the nuclear response to the PM.

It is instructive to look back at the escalation story in 1965. Pakistan's incursions into the Rann of Kutch on 24 April were ended quickly through British intervention—neither side used its

Air Forces. It is believed that Air Marshals Asghar Khan and Air Chief Marshal Arjun Singh had agreed not to use air power. But both sides had ordered full mobilisation. India's was called Operation Ablaze and was executed on 29 April. In July 1965, troops were withdrawn but only partially by both sides. This was followed in August 1965 by Pakistan launching Operation Gibraltar; infiltration in J&K.<sup>12</sup> This triggered off a tit-for-tat exchange. India mounted Operation Bakshi and Operation Faulad in Haji Pir and Kishanganga Bulge. Pakistan retaliated with Operation Grand Slam in Chhamb- Jaurian. With its back to the wall it was India that called in the Air Force at Chhamb. This forced India into crossing the IB in Sialkot and Lahore Sectors in Operation Riddle. It was India which surprised Pakistan by extending the war from J&K across the IB to the Punjab plains in September 1965.

It was India which moved up on the escalation ladder by bringing in the IAF first in Chammd. Pakistan miscalculated India's resolve to defend J&K. It had forgotten that on 28 April 1965, soon after the skirmish in the Rann of Kutch, Indian Prime Minister LB Shastri had said that an attack on J&K would be deemed as an attack on India and that India would take whatever military measures necessary anywhere to thwart Pakistani designs.<sup>13</sup> During the 1965 war, Point 13620, the most dominating feature in Kargil was captured twice by the Indian Army in April and August that year and believe it or not, was returned to Pakistan both times. Such was the civility of conflict and power of mediation then. It was only after 1971 that military gains across LoC by either side were for keeps.

The object of 1965 illustration is to show that both sides understood escalation control and rules of engagement. This had come about after 50 years of coexistence across the LoC and 20 years along the AGPL in Siachen, avoiding bombing of population centres during wars and meticulously exchanging nuclear lists

since 1988. Both countries are described as civilised adversaries, certainly not ones to start nuking each other at a drop of a hat.

## Air Power

In his paper on Air Escalatory Control circulated by the Stimson Center in Washington in 2003, Air Commodore (Retd) Ramesh Phadke argued that limited air operations against Pakistan in PoK are possible and that the Air Force is the most suitable instrument of coercion with the chances of escalation being minimal or non-existent. Phadke said that Pakistan was acutely aware that the balance of air power was in India's favour: nearly 2.5 to 1. The IAF had 40 Mirage 2000, 25-35 Su30 Multi Role fighters, 80 long range Jaguar strike aircraft and 140 MiG27 ground attack fighters besides a variety of MiG21 and MiG29 aircraft.

Pakistan followed the strategy of deterrence by lowering the nuclear threshold. In PoK, Pakistan had two airfields: one at Gilgit which could take only light transport aircraft; and the other at Skardu capable of holding 4 to 6 F16 jets. A retaliatory Pakistan air strike would emanate from air bases in Pakistan in which PAF would have to cross the IB. In contrast IAF had greater freedom of action in PoK. Phadke's formulations were tentative as experts contended that escalation was inherent in the use of air forces. But the IAF believed Pakistan would not cross IB due to balance of advantage in the air being in India's favour. The Iran-Israel exchange of missiles and drones in 2024 has become a classic example of messaging in escalation control. Operation Sindoor was a massive escalation in use of force especially air assets compared to just air strikes in Balakot and though Pakistan was given the opportunity to come off-ramp, it chose not to.<sup>14</sup>

During Balakot air strikes, India made clear, that it was only targeting terrorist camp, not Pakistan per se. After the strikes, India declared the operation was over and no further action was

contemplated. Similarly, Pakistan's counter air strikes were intended to be demonstrative without causing any damage to prevent escalation. US' active involvement then helped defuse and seal the crisis. Operation Sindoor has validated Phadke's untested contention that air power is minimally escalatory, especially when employed stand-off and against Pakistan.

## Critique of Deployment

Four main points are made against India's en bloc deployment:

- Coercion was not calibrated and that the last step was taken first. Mobilisation was not done step by step. On the other hand, in order to retain credibility of threat, deployment was done at short notice. Even for surgical strikes, full deployment was considered necessary as Indian intelligence was unable to discount a ground offensive by Pakistan in response to air strikes.
- Lack of synergising and packaging the military-diplomatic coercive strategy. Erringly, India kept multiplying its demands to Pakistan like adding the list of 20 most wanted terrorists and later, additional demands.
- An exit strategy was not factored. India could have pulled out after 12 January or after 27 May when Musharraf conceded, in theory at least, to most of the demands made by India. The idea of proclaiming success and withdrawing especially in June, was seriously considered in the CCS but rejected as India had to first test on the ground, the results of the Musharraf pledges. Therefore, the Indian dilemma was: how to sustain beyond a time, the credibility of the threat of use of force when it was becoming increasingly clear the US would prevent the use of force by India.



Operation Parakram continued even after the option of going to war had become improbable. Political dithering dragged the deployment. An earlier withdrawal was not favoured owing to the elections in J&K and Pakistan. Even so the threat of war and containment had to be kept up for whatever it was worth. For the COAS, a September offensive was still an option. As the Army did not advise withdrawal, the government used NSAB to do so. The momentum of creative diplomacy and political resolve inevitably stalled after a point and went missing altogether by July 2002. Parakram had been overstretched and it was out of breath.

### **Gains from Parakram**

The gains of Parakram were:

- Securing public pledges on stopping terrorism from Musharraf. These were made in public and to the US President and other world leaders.
- Terrorist groups were put on FTO by US, UK and banned by Pakistan. Their accounts were frozen.
- Pinning down Pakistan on CBT and for lowering nuclear threshold. It was no longer 'militancy' in J&K but 'terrorism'.
- Infiltration declined by 53 percent.
- Elections in J&K were held without interference from Pakistan and certification obtained from the US and the West that these were free and fair.
- There were no terrorist attacks outside J&K.
- A ceasefire was secured along LoC in 2003 and a new political process started.

- The Army improved its defences along IB and LOC, especially in Kargil by eliminating residual threats from 1999 skirmish.
- Fencing network system along LoC from Chenab River to Zojila pass came up and became the fulcrum of the counter-infiltration grid.
- It led to formation of Cold Start doctrine, the current Integrated Battle Groups and the debate on consequences of restraint and inaction. It is understood that Cold Start is being refined further in its new avatar viz. Dynamic Start to keep the enemy guessing before he begins devising a counter to Indian tactical innovation.
- India has moved on from fighting compartmentalised battles like in Kargil - Army's Op Vijay and IAF's Op Safed Sagar- to a tri-service Op Sindoor.

There are less tangible and longer term gains

- Stirring a debate inside Pakistan on the utility of Jihad and CBT—the nature of relations with India, the cost of confrontation and even a realisation that Pakistan cannot afford a war with India.
- First serious questioning of the role of the Pakistan Army. Chief of General Staff, Gen Mohammad Aziz Khan's remarks that politics in uniform is not the done thing, referring to Musharraf was unusual and a first.
- US Congress was required to certify progress in Pakistan on CBT, democracy and non-proliferation.

## The Nuclear Factor

Both India and Pakistan carried out tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998 and became nuclear powers. There was lack of clarity in use of nuclear weapons till nuclear doctrines or their use was articulated. While Pakistan announced its nuclear policy earlier in 2000, India's nuclear doctrine was enunciated only in 2003 and that too, informally by retired MoD official and strategic expert K Subrahmanyam. Consequently, there was doubt among the international community especially US about its rational employment as a tool of coercion and deterrence. Further, the frequency of crisis over Kashmir had led to it being declared a nuclear flashpoint by the US. Nuclear instability was exaggerated by Pakistan and the West after Pakistan lowered the nuclear threshold to prevent war. Further, it enabled Pakistan to internationalise Kashmir and P 5 countries in UNSC to demand a cap on India-Pakistan nuclear capability. During the military standoff, some short range missiles were relocated on both sides but none was weaponised. Service Chiefs were shown the components of nuclear weapons. NSA Mishra checked out nuclear readiness between 16 and 18 May. COAS had asked scientists in BARC to prepare the nuclear cores for Prithvi missiles. Nuclear assets were relocated from the original six to three locations and shown to Service Chiefs. India's Agni I test in January 2003 was a direct outcome of the destabilising nature of fielding short range Prithvi missiles as a nuclear deterrent. India and Pakistan's nuclear assets stayed de-alerted throughout the confrontation. Further, the nuclear facilities lists were exchanged on time. The threat of nuclear war was also blown out of proportion by the foreign media. Many foreigners in India chose to be evacuated.

- A Stimson Center report in 2003 reported that nuclear signaling was confusing as number of persons authorised to

signal has to be limited and backed up by back-channel for accurate interpretation.

- For Pakistan, nuclear weapons were meant both – to deter a conventional limited war as well as for war fighting. Pakistan indicated its nuclear capability as a military and political weapon. That is why, Pakistan's First Use Nuclear (FUN), lowering of nuclear threshold and nuclearising Kashmir were synchronised in its national strategy. India saw this as nuclear blackmail or nuclear terrorism by Pakistan.
- For India, the bomb is a political weapon. It threatens punitive nuclear retaliation to deter FUN by Pakistan. This also enables creating strategic space for limited war.
- The element of uncertainty arose from the blur line between nuclear use and deterrence. For Pakistan, it was critical to appear determined to use nuclear weapons due to inferiority in conventional forces.
- Pakistan's nuclear signaling was recorded seven times. Nuclear threats were issued between 6 April and 8 June. Pakistan also carried out three missile tests to demonstrate delivery systems between 25 and 28 May.
- Nuclear signaling was believed to have been done in India by COAS, Defence Minister, PM, and NSA but details are not accessed.
- Nuclear brinkmanship by Pakistan came from lowering nuclear threshold despite India's second-strike capability. India too, it was argued, was being reckless by threatening limited war, despite an uncertain outcome due to Pakistan's FUN.

- The chances of misperception and miscalculation were present due to India-Pakistan's divergent perceptions on critical nuclear-weapon related issues, both political and military. This was exacerbated by Pakistan's confused articulation about its nuclear and conventional capabilities.
- Pakistan has refused to discuss a nuclear restraint regime as it wants to keep the nuclear crisis alive and has therefore linked any discussion on this with Kashmir.
- Indian military objectives were determined by Pakistan's nuclear threshold.
- India was deemed 'nuclear - ready' when Prithvi missile groups had been deployed. A war game was simulated about a Pakistan tactical nuclear strike with estimated yield of 15 KT against the Desert Corps. India retaliated by targeting four cities in Pakistan including Multan. A damage assessment was done but results were not declassified. A second exercise was planned but was not held. The planned briefing of select parliamentarians was also not held. But at Army Military Operations directorate, Service Chiefs were familiarised with nuclear plans.
- All necessary nuclear drills were taped with BARC and DRDO.
- Nuclear signaling was done by both sides during Kargil, Balakot and by Pakistan even before Op Sindoor.
- During Op Sindoor, US detected what it calls 'dynamic targeting' (movement of nuclear assets) on 9/10 May which set off alarm bells and resulted in US intervention towards crisis management.<sup>15</sup>

## Costs of Confrontation

The cost for India was estimated to be \$1.8 billion and for Pakistan \$1.2 billion. Surprisingly, both economies did well and the military's standoff had no short-term negative impact. But the overall long-term costs were huge. President, Strategic Foresight Group, Sandeep Waslekar's paper on 'Cost of Confrontation 2001-02' provides graphically physical, fiscal and environmental costs of Operation Parakram.<sup>16</sup>

India suffered nearly 1500 casualties – 785 killed upto July 2003 without going to war. Maximum losses were due to demining and mine accidents. Pakistan Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz reported in December 2003 that US had provided it \$ 891 mn in direct compensation, \$ 600 mn as cash grant, and \$ 500 mn as aid. It also helped rescheduling Pakistan's debt worth \$ 12.5 bn with help of Paris club.

## Pakistani Perception of Op Parakram

This account was obtained from the Kathmandu conference on Operation Parakram held in June 2003 and was mainly the establishment view.

Pakistani delegates, majority of whom were government officials, serving or retired, did not present their side of the military confrontation which the Pakistan Army had called Operation Sabit Qadam (Steadfast). Their views were:

- India's coercive diplomacy had failed in bullying them. They made a case of being the aggrieved party – the victimhood saga.
- A case was also made that the strategy of containment to economically wear down Pakistan had backfired.

- The military show of forces had no effect in Pakistan. It was a non-event and was ignored by the media. This was repudiated by one of the participants who was the only one not from the establishment.
- Pakistan's nuclear capability had deterred India and therefore, few expected it to declare war.
- Although, they condemned the attack on Parliament, they maintained that Pakistan was not responsible for it and that a joint investigation could be held to determine the identity of culprits.
- According to Pakistani commentators, Indian military deployment was better than during Brass Tacks. But they expected only surgical strikes in PoK. It was admitted that 275 Pakistani soldiers were killed on the LoC in 2003.

Pervez Musharraf visited China at the height of the Parakram crisis in May 2002. The Chinese shipped two squadrons of F-7 MG fighters in January 2002. A Chinese shipment of missiles arrived via the Karakoram highway also in May 2002. Gen Jehangir Karamat led a delegation to EU explaining Pakistan's nuclear stand. Delegations were also sent to many other countries denying its hand in the attack on Parliament and justifying its response. Interestingly, China kept equidistance between the two countries during Parakram. During earlier crises in 2008, 2016 and 2019, Beijing officially maintained a neutral position. Even after Pahalgam, although endorsed UNSC resolution condemning the terrorist attack, it helped Pakistan in toning down its contents. China has doggedly vetoed UN resolutions against Pakistani terrorists individually or some of their organisations. It has invariably supported Pakistan's demand for joint or neutral probe into a terrorist attack. The most recent instance was in aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack.

## The Role of the Media

Both countries were addressing their own people and the international community. The Indian media had only a limited interest after the deployment was in place. The interest would ebb and rise in sync with proximity to and probability of war. The media was not taken to the forward areas; therefore, could not cover details of the deployment like in Kargil. Generally, the Indian media was critical of the government's handling of the mission. The international media's main concern was over nuclear war. So, this aspect was highlighted and even exaggerated. The withdrawal of troops was a very sombre affair. There were no fireworks in declaring the relocation of troops on 16 October. For Pakistan it was victory day. India has lagged behind Pakistan in seizure of initiative in the contesting and conflicting battle of narratives. This was evident during subsequent conflicts like Uri, Balakot and Pahalgam. Pakistan's strategic communications is still one notch up compared to India's as it continues to win the battle of narratives. Op Sindoor showed it.

## Strategic Fallout

Like US had felt let down by India's decision not to send troops to Iraq, India felt it had been let down by the US in its fight against CBT. Therefore, the common refrain on the part of Indian leaders was of US duplicity and double standards on terrorism while pretending it was business as usual. But Brajesh Mishra had observed that it was in US legitimate interest to prevent war. Some experts have referred to the crisis as a quandary for the US: making a choice in who to support between India and Pakistan. Remember Pakistan was vital to US for its war in Afghanistan. For the first time, after 1962, US had good relations with both India and Pakistan. Pakistan believed it had deterred India and proclaimed victory after Indian troop withdrawal. Islamabad claimed it had



deterred India by its conventional and nuclear capability which Jaswant Singh called nuclear blackmail. In 1999, Pakistan advanced the myth that it had defeated India in Kargil. A similar error of judgment was made again by Pakistan after the 2002 confrontation. India was certainly not deterred by Pakistan. It may have been deterred by the US or self-deterred from going to war.

US strategic presence and clout in the region became far more pronounced than before, due to arrival of NATO troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan once again, became a frontline ally of the US. It was able to withstand the pressures from Afghanistan and India mainly due to US political and economic assistance. In fact, the US helped Pakistan break out of India's containment, thanks to the \$ 3 billion reward package. This was preceded by a \$ 3 bn debt write-off. A stable India-Pakistan normalisation process focused on people-to-people CBMs, including the 2003 cease fire on the LoC which survived till 2013. The four-point Kashmir formula to resolve India-Pakistan territorial dispute over Kashmir was the direct fall out from Parakram but it failed to materialise due to lack of political will in India and Musharraf's gradual ouster from the helm in Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Operation Parakram has shown that if pushed beyond a point, India is prepared in its national interest to go to the brink of war, even fight a limited war with attendant nuclear risks, to deter Pakistan from following its policy of jihad. India was held back from the brink partly by itself and partly by the US.

It is clear that while the Army was fully primed for delivering retribution of high order the government itself was ambivalent, even unwilling to take the country to war. Decision-makers were divided. Even though today there is a strong and unwavering leader in Mr. Modi, India can ill afford conflict or war when he is

telling rest of the world this is not era of war and wishes for India to be a developed nation by 2047. Parakram is unlikely to be ever replicated, but some of its operational and diplomatic issues/aspects will serve as a guide. Since Operation Parakram, thinking has changed from deterrence by threat to deterrence by punishment.<sup>18</sup>

The lessons of the confrontation were evaluated though CBT reduced but did not cease. Coercive diplomacy will work better in a situation of asymmetry. Between equals or near equals diplomacy has to play the lead role and a big power has to come out in support of either of the two for a measure of success. The potency of Indian conventional capability was to achieve a decisive edge for deterrence to visibly sustain in order to effectively control infiltration and violence. The people of J&K are caught in the cross fire and the battle for hearts and minds will need to be recalibrated. Deterrence to be effective requires local support of civil society, administration, law enforcing agencies and elected government. Alienation of people is a big disincentive. India has been through serial terrorist attacks with considerable embarrassment to the state of internal security environment, especially after declaring J&K free of terrorism following revocation of Article 370.

The deterrence effect post Balakot had eroded considerably. The Pahalgam carnage led to a massive retribution through Operation Sindoor that has established the dominance of air power and allied air and air borne assets. India has snatched control of escalation from Pakistan by shifting the burden of escalation on to it and raising the nuclear threshold for any retaliation. The government has acknowledged the dominant role of IAF in new age warfare, its superiority in counter air operations. It must quickly make good the shortfall in its squadron strength to deter a two front likely three front active confrontation. IAF proved its mettle in battle of attrition but in capture and retention of territory

like retaking PoK land armies will play a pivotal role. Typically an air-land contingency which will warrant a higher investment in defence increased to at least 2.5 percent of GDP from the present below 2 percent and maintaining the enhancement pegged as percentage of GDP. This is one clear lesson of Op Sindoor. Defence capability along with capacities must be augmented in sync with world wide drive towards enhancing it; NATO is enhancing to ultimately 5 percent of GDP and even once pacifist countries like Japan and Germany breaking their self-imposed ceiling of 1 percent.

Another terrorist attack like the one in Pahalgam in an alienated J&K cannot always be prevented despite the new normal of the muscular counter terrorism doctrine.<sup>19</sup> Like it or not the real message from Pahalgam is that terror and talks will, at some time, have to go together, if the cycle of violence is to reduce and end. There is no military solution to CBT. Operation Parakram will serve both as a guide and pointer for coercive diplomacy, future mobilisation and limited use of conventional force. For this, institutional memory has to be reinforced. Jasjit Singh in his time believed in terrorism-fatigue and doubted its longevity but advocated building overwhelming military superiority over Pakistan.

## End notes

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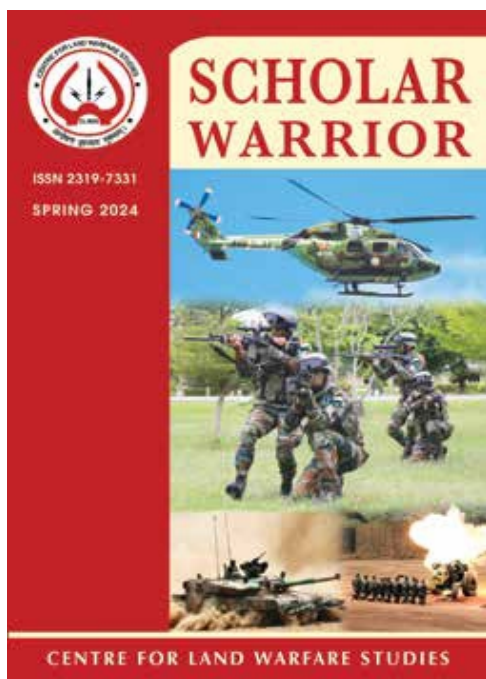
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## Notes

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All then privileged information was acquired from policy and operational decisionmakers of the time, as stated in the preface.

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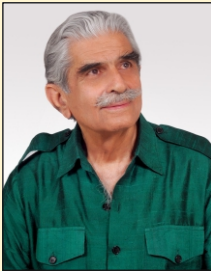


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In many ways, Operation Parakram was ahead of its time. This is not an antithesis. It contained all the elements of modern statecraft – national power, politics, diplomacy and coercive use of force. It was long -duration like no previous conflict sans use of force. It is a textbook case of non-contact conflict in exercise of coercive diplomacy, escalation control, deterrence, info war and nuclear signalling. Though the nuclear doctrine had not been enunciated at the time, nuclear factor became the most powerful deterrent to conflict. The war that never happened was due to foresight and level-headedness of PM Vajpayee. Though neither victory nor defeat resulted from the stand-off, an outcome did. While two terrorist assaults over six months that went militarily unresponded reflected inscrutable defiance and inexplicable restraint, they also demonstrated utter lack of defence preparedness: holes in military inventory, absence of deterrence and unwillingness to use force. Op Parakram was matched by Op Sabit Qadam. India, Pakistan and US had vital stakes in them. US wanted to avert war between India and Pakistan. India wanted to win without fighting a war. Pakistan did not want war either. US was fighting its own Op Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Army Chief Gen Padmanabhan though was itching for a fight with Pakistan.

India has moved on from Op Parakram to Uri to Balakot and to Muridke and transformed the use of force into an art during a non-contact and standoff delivery of retribution to lift the veil of nuclear blackmail.

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**Major General Ashok K Mehta** who was commissioned in 1957, in Second Five Gorkha Rifles (FF) graduated from Command and General Staff College, USA and Royal College of Defence Studies, UK. He is a founding member of the Defence Planning Staff; last assignment being GoC, IPKF (South) Sri Lanka. Mehta fought all the wars till 1971, operations in the North East and J&K and UNPKO Congo. Mehta has written two books *War Despatches – Operation Iraqi Freedom*; and *The Royal Nepal Army: Meeting the Maoist Challenge*. He was convenor of several Track II dialogues and peace processes –

India-Pakistan, India-Sri Lanka, India-Nepal, India-Afghanistan and Pakistan; notably project manager of a South Asian regional peace keeping force. Mehta is invitee to ICT Tel Aviv, Wilton Park and Ditchley in UK. He continues trekking in Nepal adding to his 60,000 kilometres.



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