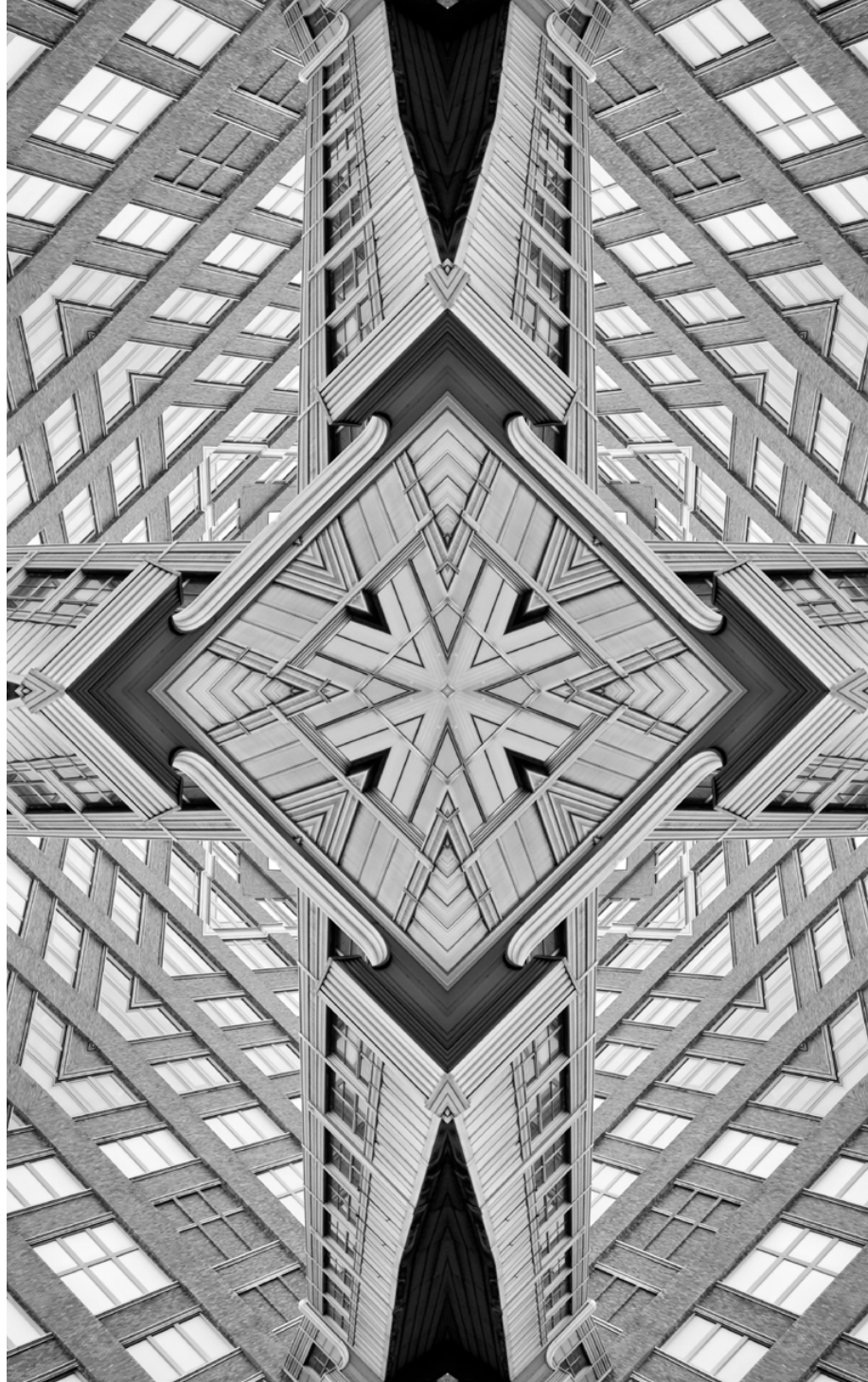


Issue

Brief

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Risk Assessment and Escalation Management in India-Pakistan Conflicts

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Abstract

Since August 2021 when the US withdrew from Afghanistan, ceasefire violations at the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LoC) and killings of minorities in J&K have been reported. Indeed, the fall of Kabul to the Taliban has bolstered the anti-India establishment and the terrorist groups in Pakistan—putting the February 2021 ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan under stress. India's conventional military response of the type of the 'Surgical Strike' or the 'Balakot Air Strike' to Pakistan's policy of employing non-state actors and other asymmetries may lead to escalation in military situation. This brief analyses the elements of escalation and escalation management in India-Pakistan conflicts and explores how thresholds can be moderated.

Many Indian security analysts and diplomats have long asserted a preference for a rules-based global order and following interstate diplomacy and established patterns of functioning of state institutions (including security establishment), indicating India's position as a status quo power. Pakistan, on the other hand, has often displayed a revisionist agenda, repeatedly creating situations that, in its assessment, are likely to help it balkanise India and annex the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Consequently, the two nations have engaged in four wars of varying intensity, and numerous smaller conflicts, since their independence in 1947. However, in recent years, India's actions vis-à-vis Pakistan have changed to reflect its increasing risk-taking ability—in particular, the much-publicised “Surgical Strike” launched in the wake of the Uri terror attack and the air strike on the terrorist training camp at Balakot after the Pulwama attack of 2019, both of which were escalatory in nature.

Some progress towards reconciliation was made between India and Pakistan in February 2021, when the two agreed to a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC).¹ However, the withdrawal of the United States (US) from Afghanistan has once again caused a strain in the fragile security situation in the region. There have been cases of ceasefire violations (CFVs) in the Sambha² and the Tithwal Sector of J&K,³ and a spate of killings of members of minority communities in the first two weeks of October 2021.⁴ Thus, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is likely to continue bolstering terrorist groups as well as anti-India sentiments within the Pakistani establishment, posing a real possibility of a breakdown of the ceasefire agreement and a return to the “live LoC” situation.

While India is now at a juncture where economic development and social cohesion are central to its existence, and the Pakistan-sponsored proxy war does not pose an “over-arching threat,”⁵ it will nonetheless be in India's interest to deter Pakistan from initiating terrorist activities to ensure a conducive domestic environment for sustained development. This will, in turn, require a comprehensive understanding of the subject of escalation and escalation management to safeguard against an all-out war.

The Balakot Air Strike and the Uri Surgical Strike can be classified as potential game-changers, due to their scope and magnitude and because they were owned by the incumbent government. The two operations are also escalatory compared to other military operations, including the cross-LoC raids in recent years. This brief attempts to analyse the elements of *escalation* and *escalation management* by examining the two operations and the frequent CFVs at the LoC. It focuses on escalation mechanisms and how thresholds can be moderated, as well as the correlation between risk assessment and escalation. As parties to the conflict, both India and Pakistan have levers to manipulate levels of escalation, making it extremely difficult for any one party to control escalation. Thus, developing an understanding of risk assessment can help in escalation management.

The (Uri) Surgical Strike

On 16 September 2016, a group of four heavily armed terrorists infiltrated from across the LoC and launched a suicide attack on an administrative base of the Indian Army (IA) located in the Uri Garrison. In approximately three hours, all four terrorists were eliminated by the IA's Quick Reaction Team (QRT), but not before 19 Indian soldiers had lost their lives—most of them dying in their sleep inside highly inflammable tents. It was the biggest loss that the IA had suffered in a terror attack in 15 years, and set off a chain of events that culminated in a surgical strike on the morning of 29 September 2016.

The decision to launch the operation was taken at the highest level of the government.⁶ Later, when the operation was terminated after successful exfiltration by the Special Forces (SF), the decision to go public with the news of the operation was again taken at the highest level. The operation “had to be calibrated so that the backlash doesn't go out of hand ... [Indian Army] had to hit ... [Pakistan] humiliate them, but only to the extent that they kept looking over their shoulders, kept sweating, thinking what next, and not plan for a conventional escalation to an all-out war.”^{a,7} Accordingly, the Commanding Officers of the SF battalions were given two tasks—inducing fear and exacting revenge—through the destruction of terrorist infrastructure opposite Uri, on both sides of the Pir Panjal Range. The two SF battalions succeeded, and approximately 75–80 Pakistan Army (PA) soldiers and terrorists were neutralised. While both the Pakistani government and the PA deny this, evidence suggests⁸ that several soldiers and terrorists were killed in the operations and their bodies removed by PA soldiers (not villagers), as is normally the case.

a As documented by Nitin Gokhale in his book, *Securing India the Modi Way: Pathankot, Surgical Strikes and More*. Attributed to Lt Gens Satish Dua and R.R. Nimborhkar, then heading the Srinagar-based Chinar and Nagrota-based White Knight Corps, respectively.

The Balakot Air Strike

On 14 February 2019, India witnessed one of the worst Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks in the history of the three-decade-old militancy in J&K. A terrorist collided his SUV, laden with over 300 kilograms of explosives, with a convoy bus, killing 43 soldiers of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

India retaliated at multiple levels—financial, military, and diplomacy. On 26 February 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted air strikes deep inside Pakistan, in Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, neutralising “a very large number” of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorists and their trainers.⁹ In response, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) launched an air strike on 27 February 2019 in the Rajouri Sector.^b

Former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Northern Command, Lt Gen. H.S. Panag contends that India’s “immediate political aim was to set a new normal – to strike preemptively against terrorism-related targets anywhere in Pakistan ... and shape the international opinion against its use of terrorism as a state policy. India’s military aim was to demonstrate its capability for the same, neutralise Pakistan’s response with heavy costs and be prepared for escalation.” Pakistan’s “immediate political strategy was to preserve its sovereignty, retain its international relevance and deter India from exploiting the new normal. Its military aim was to neutralise India’s preemptive strikes with heavy costs, demonstrate its capability for a quid pro quo response, and be prepared for escalation.”¹⁰ India had struck the terrorist camp located in Pakistani heartland, beyond Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), while Pakistan chose to strike in J&K, in uninhabited areas.

To be sure, the actions of both the countries were escalatory. India’s motive for employing air power to hit the terrorist camp at Balakot was to drive home the message that Pakistan would have to pay a price for any terrorist action traced back to it, and thereby deter it from repeating such attacks. Pakistan, on the other hand, employed air power to induce caution and fear in India’s decision-makers that costly escalation would follow if India chose to retaliate in the manner of the Balakot Air Strike.

b These air strikes in February 2019 were the first between the two nations in almost 50 years.

Ceasefire Violations as a Tool for Messaging

Fire assaults and cross-LoC raids by both India and Pakistan are normally understood to constitute CFVs, often aimed at achieving local area dominance and as a tool of political and military messaging. CFVs have been initiated by both nations to ‘celebrate’ national days and days of religious significance to either side, cause casualties in the rival country, gauge the military prowess of the enemy, and sometimes too, for no apparent reason at all. Additionally, Pakistan has been known to initiate fire assaults to support the infiltration of terrorist groups. This changed in 2003, when the two countries agreed to a ceasefire on the LoC.¹¹ However, over time there was a return to business-as-usual conflicts on the LoC, until the two sides agreed to renew the ceasefire again in February 2021.

India’s security interest demands that Pakistan take demonstrable and verifiable actions to prevent terrorist attacks in India. Thus, the Indian strategy combines *diplomacy*, to isolate and exert pressure on Pakistan, with *military preparedness*, and *action*. CFVs on the LoC are key to this strategy; Pakistan uses CFVs for retribution to Indian action, area domination, and facilitation of terrorist infiltration across the LoC. In addition to military factors, domestic concerns are an important determinant in formulating CFV policy. According to Former Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, domestic drivers often trump strategic considerations: “Covert operations were not announced to the country ... because the primary goal was to pacify the [Line of Control] and cut down infiltration and ceasefire violations, not to manage public opinion at home.”¹²

In February 2021, PA Chief General Qamar Bajwa offered a “hand of peace” during the graduation ceremony at the PAF Academy in Risalpur. This was followed by a ceasefire agreement between the two armies. General Bajwa chose the platform of the National Security Division’s Islamabad Security Dialogue to articulate his vision for Pakistan’s comprehensive national security with economics and cooperation at its core.

For nearly three decades before the 2021 agreement, both countries would initiate CFVs intermittently, more to impress upon the rival a message than to register any military or strategic gain. These operations are, therefore, tactical in nature: the two militaries have developed an “understanding” with regards to the conduct of the CFVs and have largely been successful in controlling them. Thus, it is safe to assume that CFVs, in their present form, are not escalatory in nature; nor can analysing them provide lessons in escalation management for decision-making at the strategic level.

Escalation Dynamics in the India-Pakistan Context

Before analysing the India-Pakistan escalation dynamics, it is prudent to have a common understanding of the terms “escalation” and “escalation dominance.” These terms have been variously defined, but the following should be considered for the purpose of this brief:

Escalation is increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants while escalation dominance has been defined as a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary’s situation.¹³

Nature of Escalation and Thresholds

The academic construct of *escalation* is normally grouped under three heads: *vertical escalation*, which involves increasing intensity of conflict by employing weapons not used in the normal course, attacking new targets, or increasing the frequency of attacks; *horizontal escalation*, which involves expanding the geography of the conflict; and *political escalation*, which includes any other form of escalation that does not fit in either of the other two categories.

Both the Balakot Air Strike and the (Uri) Surgical Strike have elements of all three types of escalation. Yet, Pakistan chose to respond to the former but ignored the latter. Pakistan’s inaction in the face of the surgical strike relayed the message that it considers such action to be “acceptable,” since, in its assessment, there was no significant qualitative change in the conflict and such an escalation could be “managed” politically and militarily. Its response to the Balakot Air Strike, on the other hand, seems to convey that in that instance, the Pakistani “redline” had been breached and any such Indian action would merit retaliation, leading to conflict escalation. This is, however, an incomplete assessment of Pakistan’s course of action, since its decision was not dictated by the military situation alone.

For a comprehensive assessment, one must also consider India’s diplomatic actions to garner international support for its air strikes at Balakot, as well as Pakistan’s precarious economic situation and India’s efforts to have it “blacklisted” by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for inadequate controls over curbing money-laundering and terror-financing. The Indian government’s actions at the diplomatic level and at the FATF can be considered *political escalation*, which Pakistan remains ill-equipped to counter. Here, the understanding of

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“threshold,” an important analytical concept, is important to determine the future course of action of the two countries.

India and Pakistan, as is the case with other hostile states, define their own thresholds, which must be respected by the opponent to prevent escalation. These thresholds are constantly reinforced through rhetorical, political and military means. Further, the countries attempt to assess each other’s thresholds and factor them into operational plans. At the same time, it has to be understood that all thresholds are socially constructed and exist in the minds of the actors; they do not reflect objective reality. Thresholds are conceptual rather than physical¹⁴ and are thus variable factors, subject to changes based on the geopolitical, domestic and military environment.

India was able to identify and target Pakistan’s vulnerabilities using a holistic government approach, perhaps raising its military threshold. This situation offers two important lessons for policy formulation. First, the process of escalation is metaphorically described in terms of a ladder, with each rung representing different intensities of the conflict.¹⁵ While the *ladder* provides a simplistic explanation of an extremely ambiguous and multifaceted conflict situation given that escalation takes place in multiple domains (military, diplomatic, political, economic), it is not a complete and inclusive representation of the state of affairs and is therefore inadequate input for policy formulation. Second, each domain of conflict has its own threshold, subject to change based on factors in other domains. Indian decision-makers must be mindful of the interactive nature of the effects of various actions in each domain and their respective thresholds. Efforts must be made to temper the domestic and international environment, to moderate the levels of Pakistani thresholds before initiating any military action. Moreover, before formulating a policy, policymakers must analyse all possible inputs, including the motives for escalation and escalation mechanisms (i.e. the manner in which escalation manifests).

“India and Pakistan, as is the case with other hostile states, define their own thresholds, which must be respected by the opponent to prevent escalation.”

Escalation Mechanisms and Escalation Management

Escalation Mechanisms

The Balakot Air Strike was a case of planned, deliberate escalation.¹⁶ While India enjoys conventional military superiority over Pakistan, it is unable to enforce its will on the latter, since both nations are nuclear powers. Since the 1980s, Pakistan, in situations that could lead to military confrontation, has routinely threatened the use of nuclear weapons to deter India from launching conventional strikes. The risk of nuclear conflict in the subcontinent has, in turn, forced the US and other powers to intervene and diffuse the situation, much to the detriment of India's position. The protection afforded by the nuclear umbrella has allowed Pakistan to pursue the policy of proxy war against India. Despite the 1999 Kargil War underscoring the fact that limited war, below the nuclear threshold, was possible, India's response to the 2001 Parliament attack, the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, and other terrorist-initiated violence did not include punitive retaliation. This emboldened Pakistan to calibrate the proxy war at will.

In the wake of the Mumbai attacks, Indian decision-makers ruled out general mobilisation of the type that followed the 2001 Parliament attack. The IAF had suggested air strikes against the terrorist infrastructure in POK; however, the plan was shelved because of a lack of accurate intelligence.¹⁷ In the decade since then, India's intelligence agencies have developed the capability to gather actionable intelligence of terrorists and their infrastructure in Pakistan, and the IAF has enhanced its capabilities to hit selected targets with reasonable surety. India's decision-making has also evolved to undertake a more aggressive approach to any infringements on India's security.

The first sign of this was apparent in the June 2015 cross-border raid in Myanmar.¹⁸ The implications of this operation were manifold. It signalled the change in mindset at the highest level in terms of responding to provocative acts such as the ambush on the IA that killed 18 soldiers on 4 June 2015. At the same time, it was a message to India's adversaries that there is a cost to pay if the country's interests are harmed.¹⁹ However, the decision-makers in Pakistan did not comprehend the gravity of this message. Consequently, when the terrorists carried out suicide attacks in the Uri garrison in 2016, India retaliated by undertaking a surgical strike, and when terrorists struck at Pulwama in 2019, India responded by targeting the terrorist camp at Balakot. In both cases, India announced to the world that Pakistan-supported proxy war will not go unpunished. *These were cases of deliberate escalation.*

Escalation Mechanisms and Escalation Management

It is important to understand India's motivation for escalating the conflict. Pakistan has been pursuing the policy of proxy war ever since Independence, and with renewed vigour after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. In the face of Pakistan's blatant support to terrorists, India's policy of strategic restraint has not been effective, leading the Indian government to decide on escalating the conflict situation: first, it was assessed that conflict escalation will improve India's bargaining position vis-à-vis Pakistan; second, the government was under pressure from its domestic constituency for a verifiable, strong military action to Pakistan's provocations. The government's decision was also backed by the lessons from the Kargil War—that in the Indo-Pak context, there is space for military actions below the nuclear threshold. While the Balakot Air Strike might seem *revolutionary* when seen in isolation, in the context of the India–Pakistan strategic dynamic over the last two decades, it is more of an *evolutionary* process.²⁰

At the international level, it is likely that Pakistan will continue to garner support for its J&K policy. In the words of India's former Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Syed Akbaruddin, "Stoking diplomatic deadwood in the hope that the embers may catch fire is a parlour game at the United Nations. One of our neighbours—Pakistan—has indulged in this for years. 'The India-Pakistan Question,' inscribed on the United Nations Security Council (SC)'s agenda on January 6, 1948, was last considered by SC on November 5, 1965. Yet, on the annual requests of Pakistan, the item has remained an inert part of the Council's formal agenda."²¹

“The lesson from the Kargil War is that in the India-Pakistan context, there is space for military action below the nuclear threshold.”

Pakistan's attempts to raise the J&K issue at the UN and other international forums will constitute *political escalation* and will be undertaken in conjunction with other military and non-military initiatives. Since it is not in India's interest to get involved in an all-out war with Pakistan, it will need to respond using political and diplomatic methods. Thus, in the short to medium term, should there be another Pakistan-supported terror incident, India will benefit from containing and managing the situation instead of initiating a military response, which may be construed as escalatory.

Escalation Management

Escalation management is a function of politico-military decision-making. It requires sound policy and good strategy. The Ministry of Defence and the Indian military can support the government's escalation-management cause by building capacities of the three services and strategising their appropriate employment. This, however, is not a panacea for the proxy war being pursued by Pakistan. The greatest challenge for the policymakers is to come up with a more potent escalatory response for the asymmetric capability developed by Pakistan—that of employing non-state actors to pursue proxy wars. To be sure, there is another challenge that the decision-makers have to contend with: the situation of 'no war no peace', or limited war, between India and Pakistan. For India's strategy of deterrence to be effective, it is imperative that Pakistan be convinced that India will follow through on its declaratory policy of punitive retaliation in case Pakistan continues to sponsor terror activities against India. India's responses should induce a fear of increased intensity and a widening of the scope of conflict.

It must be noted that the strategy of punishment-based deterrence has certain limitations. Historically, this strategy has been effective in achieving its stated objectives and managing escalatory responses only under specific situations. In the case of Indo-Pak conflicts, India's attempts to deter Pakistan and moderate its India policy,^c to ensure that no terrorist act is executed in India have not been effective. India had set the stage by asking Pakistan to ensure that no terrorist group operating from its soil executes a terrorist act and had issued threats of punitive actions should Pakistan fail to conform. Thus, India's strategy of deterrence was indefinite in time and static, and Pakistan was forever expected to do India's bidding. This policy failed, since India's conventional response did not match up to Pakistan's asymmetric capabilities.

In the ongoing proxy war, a more prudent approach for India would be to militarily strengthen India's trouble spots, such as J&K, and reinforce the policy of punishment-based deterrence, but with measures to convince Pakistan that balkanising India and merging with J&K will remain beyond Pakistan's capability. The government initiative to ensure greater integration of J&K is a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done to win over the locals and integrate them. Thus, *punishment-based deterrence* policy reinforced with *capability denial* to Pakistan is the way forward to manage this cycle of deliberate escalation between the two nations.

^c Either through inducements or the threat of military retribution.

Escalation Management and Domestic Politics

The scope of this brief is limited to analysing escalation dynamics in the military domain, exclusively by examining the cross-LoC raids and air strikes similar to the Balakot Air Strike. The war between two belligerents is often a result of the escalatory dynamics of military, diplomatic and economic factors. The trajectory of conflict leading to the outbreak of war is complex, multidimensional, and a result of the intricate interplay of factors. Thus, if the factors responsible for leading to war between the hostile nations are projected in an escalatory trajectory due to the domestic policies of the governments, the two countries may later find it difficult to retrace their steps. Governments around the world have been known to employ armed forces as political instruments to secure domestic political objectives, and such employments have often resulted in inadvertent or accidental escalation.

In the 70 years since Independence, India's governance system has evolved and matured. There are systems in place, as well as checks and balances; however, the political party in power must facilitate the defence establishment in providing uncorrupted advice on the employment of the armed forces, pursuant to national security objectives. Any distraction from this, due to domestic political compulsions, may result in a situation from where extrication will be difficult, risky and costly.

Escalation Management: A Function of Political Aim and Risk Assessment

The (Uri) Surgical Strike, the Balakot Air Strike, and Pakistan's retaliatory air strike on 27 February 2019 showcase that the *political aims* of the two countries for launching the strikes and the *risk assessment* of the conflict situation were important determinants in preventing the escalating situation from spiralling out of control.

Winning a war is a political condition and is defined in political terms. In any conflict situation, the government articulates the political aim for its actions and employs the available resources to achieve the stated objective. The articulation of the aim in the conflict and the employment of resources by the government are dependent on a number of factors. For example, Pakistan-sponsored proxy wars are not an existential threat to India, but a failure to transform India's economy may become one in the future, since economic prosperity is a political imperative for the country. Therefore, at India's current stage of development, an all-out war with Pakistan to resolve the issue of cross-border terrorism is

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ill-advised and not feasible. India must accept that the issue with Pakistan is complicated and unlikely to be resolved any time soon, and that a more achievable objective would be to temporarily silence the terrorists.²² In view of the above, the Indian government had modest political and military aims for the (Uri) Surgical Strike and the Balakot Air Strike. Pakistan's retaliation on 27 February 2019 stopped short of hitting any Indian target (military or civilian), which makes the attack a suggestive escalation rather than a deliberate one, indicative of the Pakistani government's reluctance to escalate the situation since it does not serve its national interest.

The two Indian strikes were successful in driving home the message of the Indian government's resolve to hit Pakistan where it hurts. Pakistan, too, was able to convey its determination with its retaliatory strike. The three strikes have successfully introduced the escalation dimension in conflicts between India and Pakistan. More importantly, the Indian strikes have introduced an element of decision dilemma in Pakistani decision-makers. In the future, this element is likely to become an important factor in managing conflict situations, which may otherwise spiral out of control.

For all three strikes discussed here, both India and Pakistan are likely to have concluded that any further escalation would trigger a series of escalatory events, the outcome of which was not appealing or worthwhile to either party. Further, escalatory response in these situations did not hold any promise of substantial gains in the military and terrorist situation in J&K for India or Pakistan. Thus, the risks associated with the escalatory dynamics of the strikes, as well as the lack of any tangible gains, became powerful incentives for the two countries to prevent further escalation.

“At India's current stage of development, an all-out war with Pakistan to resolve the issue of cross-border terrorism is ill-advised.”

Escalation Management and Domestic Politics

Conventional Military Superiority, Economic Prosperity, and Escalation Dominance

In terms of soldiers and weapon platforms, India enjoys a conventional military superiority over Pakistan, which is likely to increase further with the acquisition of sophisticated and advanced military equipment and the modernisation of the Indian armed forces that are under way. However, the case of the US military intervention in West Asia and Afghanistan illustrates that disproportionate conventional military superiority and economic/political might is no guarantee for escalation dominance against a committed enemy with relatively inferior capabilities. Terror groups in Iraq and Afghanistan have successfully identified US asymmetric vulnerabilities and have exploited them to deny the US not only an outright victory but also the semblance of dignified withdrawal.

Currently, India is vulnerable to any impediments to economic and social development. So far, Pakistan-sponsored proxy war has been restricted to J&K, and geographic expansion of this conflict, as well as any increase in intensity, will have an adverse and a restrictive impact on India's economic activities, which India must avoid for its long-term gains. This asymmetric vulnerability negates India's conventional deterrence capability and any advantage that may accrue from the modernisation of its armed forces. To address this disadvantage, India must develop capabilities in other domains, such as a more effective voice in international forums, cyber warfare and covert operations capabilities, to dominate all possible rungs of the escalatory ladder.


“Conventional military superiority and economic/political might is no guarantee for escalation dominance against a committed enemy with inferior capabilities.”

Conclusion

Col (Dr) Rajneesh Singh is a former Infantry officer with extensive operational experience.

The Surgical Strike and the Balakot Air Strike are noteworthy military operations that mark a departure from the manner in which India has been conducting operations against Pakistan—from *counterterrorism* operations within its territory to *counter-proxy wars* inside Pakistan.²³ The operations are significant, since they indicate a change from a defensive to a more offensive approach. Furthermore, they are portentous of how India may retaliate against future Pakistani aggressions. Yet, while the two operations were escalatory compared to the Indian response to Pakistani provocations in the past, the two countries were able to manage the escalation from spiralling into an all-out war.

Escalation management of a conflict situation cannot be guaranteed for multiple reasons. First, conflict is an interactive phenomenon and the parties to conflict base their actions on their respective perception of the developing situation. Thus, the assessment of a situation by a party to the conflict may not always conform to the understanding of the adversary. Second, escalation management is a function of national capabilities, some of which may be covert. For instance, Pakistan is involved in asymmetric warfare, and India's conventional military response options to Pakistan's challenge are limited. In such a situation, where one of the parties has asymmetric capabilities, escalation management is difficult since the strategy of punishment-based deterrence has limited value. The situation as it exists between India and Pakistan allows the latter to calibrate its offensive proxy war actions, while India's conventional military responses are construed as escalatory. Therefore, India's policy option to maintain escalation dominance will require it to cultivate and possess asymmetries that Pakistan will find difficult to counter, in military and in other domains. This will help India increase Pakistan's thresholds for military punishment, enabling India to raise the bar for punitive retaliation in response to any Pakistani provocation and diminish the cycle of escalation dominance.

India must be mindful of the fact that when it comes to escalation, Pakistan can enlarge the conflict *vertically* and *horizontally*, due to its policy of proxy wars. Pakistan can calibrate terrorist actions in consonance with its objectives and geopolitical situation and also has recourse to political escalation. The current situation threatens India's long-term national objectives of nation-building and economic growth. It will be in India's interest to set a modest military objective, for the short to medium term, of controlling Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. In the long term, it is imperative that India develop the capability to escalate conflicts at will and that decision-makers develop an understanding of the subject of escalation and escalation management to preclude conflicts from spiralling into all-out war. 

- 1 PIB, “Joint Statement,” *MoD*, Feb 25, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1700682>.
- 2 Indian and Pakistani armies had reportedly exchanged fire in May 2021.
- 3 “Indo-Pak armies exchange gunfire along LoC in north Kashmir,” *The Kashmir Walla*, Sep 26, 2021, <https://thekashmirwalla.com/indo-pak-armies-exchange-gunfire-along-loc-in-north-kashmir/>.
- 4 Bharti Jain, “Targeted attacks in J&K seen as part of new ISI-backed strategy; Amit Shah chairs high-level meet,” *The Times of India*, Oct 8, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/targeted-attacks-in-jk-seen-as-part-of-new-isi-backed-strategy-amit-shah-chairs-high-level-meet/articleshow/86857651.cms>.
- 5 India’s former National Security Advisor and former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon contends that India must rethink its attitude to cross-border terrorism, which is “not an over-arching threat.” Karan Thapar, “‘Cross-Border Terror Not Over-Arching Threat, SAARC Policy Needs Review’: Former NSA,” *The Wire*, Oct 5, 2021, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/watch-karan-thapar-shivshankar-menon-saarc>.
- 6 For details on the behind the scene decision-making and the operation *per se*, see Nitin A. Gokhale, *Securing India the Modi Way: Pathankot, Surgical Strikes and More* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 7 Italic added for emphasis.
- 8 Gokhale, *Securing India the Modi Way: Pathankot, Surgical Strikes and More*, pp. 47.
- 9 The figures, as quoted in various media reports, vary from ‘few, if at all’ to over 300 terrorists and their trainers neutralised in the air strike.
- 10 See Lt Gen H S Panag, “90-hour conflict with Pakistan ended in a stalemate and that’s a defeat for India,” *The Print*, Mar 07, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/90-hour-conflict-with-pakistan-ended-in-a-stalemate-and-thats-a-defeat-for-india/202379/>.
- 11 Happymon Jacob, *The Line of Control: Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2018), pp. 51-52. Also see TCA Raghavan, *The People Next Door: The Curious History of India’s Relations with Pakistan* (Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017), pp. 263-267.
- 12 The former NSA has been quoted to suggest that the present dispensation’s CFV policy is declaratory while that of the UPA government’s was covert. See T. Negeen Pegahi, “The New India Versus the Nuclear Revolution: The Future of Crises Among Nuclear Powers,” *War on the Rocks*, June 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/the-new-india-versus-the-nuclear-revolution-the-future-of-crises-among-nuclear-powers/>.

- 13 The various aspects of escalation management in Indo-Pak context in the paper has been analysed based on the theoretical construct given in Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in 21st Century* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).
- 14 Forrest E. Morgan et. al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in 21st Century*, pp. 11-12.
- 15 Herman Kahn organised his book *On Escalation* (1965) around a hypothetical ladder of escalation in a confrontation between nuclear-armed superpowers comprising 44 rungs, more than half of which involved some use of nuclear weapons.
- 16 There are three kinds of escalation mechanisms: Deliberate, Inadvertent and Accidental Escalation. Deliberate Escalation is a result of deliberate policy decision, while Inadvertent Escalation may be an unforeseen result of intentional action. 'Accidental Escalation' is unintended escalation, a consequence of events that were not intended to occur. Forrest E. Morgan et. al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in 21st Century*, pp. 23-28.
- 17 George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, *Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross Border Terrorism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1, 46.
- 18 On 4 June 2015, a group of NSCN(K) terrorists had ambushed and killed 18 soldiers of Indian Army in the Chandel dist. of Manipur, bordering Myanmar. In the retaliatory strike, India's SFs infiltrated Myanmar's border and neutralised a large number of terrorists.
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