

**Pugwash Workshop on South Asian Security
Geneva, Switzerland, 1-3 November 2002**

The Law of Diminishing Threats

By Lt. Gen. (ret'd) Asad Durrani

There are good reasons for India and Pakistan not to escalate their running conflicts into a major war, even a conventional one. Some are well known: risk of nuclear conflagration; and, because of that, third parties primed to restrain the two sides before they went over the brink. Another, perhaps the more potent constraint, was less known. An all-out conventional war between the two countries was very likely to end in a stalemate. Since countries do not normally start "big wars" without a reasonable chance of achieving a strategic objective, both India and Pakistan have not, during the last three decades, taken their conflicts beyond build up on the borders and skirmishes across the Line of control in Kashmir (LOC).

It is possible however that India, because of its size and strength, was tempted to believe that it could affect a strategic breakthrough. The problem is that if the ensuing war did not result in a decisive victory, India would be in serious trouble. Active hostilities would remove all constraints on Pakistan to support the insurgency (in Kashmir); that may then become more intense and durable. More importantly, it would deprive India of a potent card that it has so far used to good effect: the threat of war.

Indeed, wars were not started only when success was assured. There may be compelling political reasons to do so. Accidents can also lead to war; especially when there were long running disputes, like over Kashmir; or forces were deployed in battle positions for prolonged periods. And of course, one or the other side might believe that through brilliance or resilience it could break the stalemate. Possible of course, and that is what the military art is all about. Once again, such thinking was more likely to find favour on the Indian side than on ours. And just in case they did decide to put this idea into practice, and (Allah Forbid) succeeded, it would be our turn to be in serious trouble.

Deterrence worked not merely because one had the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor; one also had to have the will to use the deterrent; and the other side knew, or at least seriously suspected, that both the will and the capability were in place. In principle therefore, the resolve to use the nuclear weapons, if our "core interests" were at risk, was an essential element of our doctrine of deterrence. In practice, mustering the will to pull the nuclear trigger, regardless of what interests were threatened, required super human will and subhuman instincts. Instead of killing millions of people and devastating large tracts of territory, our decision makers might well choose to live and fight another day. "Self-deterrence" is a concept that we do not often talk about or adequately study, but are well familiar with, also at sub-nuclear levels.

A nuclear exchange was certainly possible, if not in desperation than in panic. If either of us, India or Pakistan, suspected that the other side had already used or was about to use nuclear weapons, it was very likely to reach for the red button. Self-deterrence in this case would have no chance. To prevent that, we will have to take some other measures.

Pre-emption was another scenario that can arguably lead to a nuclear war. If one side, India likelier than Pakistan, decided to take out the adversary's capability through a pre-emptive strike, even by conventional means, the exchange may rapidly turn nuclear. This contingency can be averted simply by creating "reasonable doubts" in the pre-emptor's mind: all enemy weapons may not be located; some, though located, might move before these could be engaged; what if some of the targeted weapons survived; what if few of them could be fired; and what if fewer still found a worthwhile target; etc, etc.

Despite a long history of ill-will and possession of lethal arsenal, if both India and Pakistan have contained their armed conflicts to minor skirmishes, it was not merely due to divine or human intervention. There has also been some solid conventional and non-conventional logic that has helped. The bad news is that armed with this knowledge, both sides have no compelling reason to relent from their hardened positions. It has in fact led both of them to find some very un-ingenuous ways to make life difficult for their adversary.

India for example believes, rightly, that tension between the two affected Pakistan more starkly. When Pakistan offers to resume talks, it does so, not because the talks by themselves would achieve much, but to lower the temperature. India understandably spurns such efforts. By the same logic, India can use the threat of war, even mobilise for war, to unsettle normal life and economic activity in Pakistan. Earlier this year, this stratagem also served to dilute some adverse fallout from the massacres in Gujarat. Any negative implications of these tensions for India are thus more than offset by much larger gains.

Pakistan, too, convinced that the worst was avoidable, has learnt to live with the charges of "cross border terrorism". Many in fact believe, not too wrongly, that supporting the insurgency in Kashmir was the only way to keep the issue alive. Some people in Pakistan naively (foolishly, in fact) suggest that the problem, if not resolved, might lead to a nuclear war. In the absence of any desperate resolve on our part to backup these threats, such insinuations are correctly understood as gimmicks to get others involved. It may frustrate some of us but the alternative was worse. If our threats were ever taken more seriously, the potential involvers might find restraining us a more feasible option than persuading India to change its position on Kashmir.

In fact, both India and Pakistan believe that they do not have to change their respective position on Kashmir, and not only because they can sustain the present standoff. More importantly, in their perception, the political cost of giving up a fifty years old claim was less affordable than the present inconvenience. The only serious and sensible attempt to breakthrough this logjam was made by the two foreign secretaries nudged by Prime ministers Rao and Sharif, in August 1997.

Any meaningful dialogue between us has to take into account the dilemma of the two countries. Pakistan cannot start talking without at least seen to be seriously discussing Kashmir, and India could not indulge in any process where Kashmir was seen to be negotiated seriously. The ingenuous solution found at that time was creatively dubbed as the "composite approach": parallel talks on all important issues including Kashmir. The idea was to provide adequate arguments with which the two sides could pacify their detractors back home. We could tell our people that Kashmir was being discussed, and the Indians might well argue that it would be a marginal issue. In essence it was to be a "multi-track, multi-speed" dialogue. Movement on Kashmir was bound to be slow, but the overall progress of the process would have helped.

An idea however is only as good as its management. In our zeal to declare victories and because of our propensity for one-up-man ship, this opportunity was squandered. The all-pervasive logjam continues, waiting for some other innovation.

We may or may not find other novelties, but one thing is clear, or should be clear. The old ruses that both countries have off and on used will no longer work. India's threat of a conventional war seems to have run its course. During the last ten months, though it was backed by full mobilization, and even if it did create some anxious moments, its limitations too have come to the fore. In any case, one cannot cry wolf too often. Pakistan's "warnings" of nuclear war never impressed the relevant quarters.

One risk, however, remains real; that of an unintended nuclear launch, more in panic, in the belief that the other side had fired, or was about to fire, a nuclear warhead. This possibility has been a major concern ever since the two countries went overtly nuclear. This was the main reason for Bajpai's bus ride to Lahore. I wish the Conference had concentrated a little more on this aspect. Instead, swamped by the all-prevailing euphoria, it adopted an over-ambitious agenda that could not withstand the realities of fifty years' Sub-continental malice.

With some knowledge of the two armed forces, I do believe that at their level, some form of mechanism to avert the nuclear panic was in place. Since I have very little faith in the traditional ICBMs, which work only in good faith, or for deception, this was the only practical solution. Let those who had the most to lose in nuclear accidents, also work out how best to avert them. The rest of the world, though not waiting for any advice from me, would do better by not taking much notice of the two belligerents, at least for the time being. Most of their bellicosity is for outside consumption. Failed in that objective, they would have no incentive to make these warlike noises. That might encourage the peacemakers on both sides to become more active.

Salient points of this paper are as follows: -

- a) The military equation of India and Pakistan, and their military geography, make an all-out conventional war very unlikely. Limited armed conflicts, especially across the LOC in Kashmir, may continue. But there is practically no chance that these, or even an escalation, would lead to a nuclear exchange.
- b) Both countries do dispense threats of war: India a conventional one, and Pakistan with a nuclear variant. Both had reasons to do so, but their arguments no longer impress.
- c) Accidental nuclear firing in times of tension is still possible. I believe, at the military level both of them have evolved a system to prevent that.
- d) The ability of the outsiders to help resolve the hostility between the two countries is extremely limited. They can hardly persuade them to start any meaningful dialogue. They might now consider ignoring their quarrels for sometime.
- e) Once the war drums cease or recede, that would be the right time to start a low profile process, even a covert one, to find durable peace.