
Cold Start: New Doctrinal Thinking in the Army

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Introduction

The genesis of the cold start doctrine lies in the lessons learnt during Operation Parakram, where apparent limitations of the army's war-fighting doctrine to force a strategic decision on its adversary stood exposed. There is wide perception that Operation Parakram as an exercise in coercive diplomacy to dissuade Pakistan from continuing proxy war and terrorist activities against India failed to achieve its intended strategic or operational objectives.

Two rationales are offered. One, the long mobilisation period of the army's offensive strike reserves from their peace locations to their concentration areas running into two to three weeks on account of exterior lines of mobilisation led to loss of strategic surprise, allowing Pakistan to counter mobilise. Two, the Western powers, increasingly concerned about the stand-off, utilised the extended mobilisation period to defuse the crisis, thus, effectively restraining India from exercising any planned offensive options. The above perceptions were further reinforced by the declining edge in conventional force ratios.

The edifice of the cold start doctrine highlights a shift in the Indian armed forces in general, and the army in particular, from a defensive reactive strategic thinking to a more proactive approach to leverage conventional Indian force superiority by seizing early initiatives in any confrontation. In some ways, it is quite akin to the active defence and anti-access doctrines of the People's Liberation Army(PLA). The anti-access doctrine of the PLA is premised on preventing an adversary from building up the full potential of its combat power by launching preemptive strikes to degrade its war-fighting capability. The fundamental perspective being that if the adversary is allowed to mass his forces,

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it will inevitably result in a war of attrition. The strategy of active defence, on the other hand, allows a preemptive action primarily as a defensive measure, in Chinese parlance, particularly when attack or build-up is seen as imminent.

The Cold Start Doctrine

The doctrine envisages converting holding formations (deployed on defensive tasks on the border) into strong pivot formations capable of providing launch pads for strike formations. A major change in conceptual thinking is in the manner of organisation for combat of large strike formations. Seen as huge and unwieldy, the thought process revolves around creating a number of divisional size, all-arms integrated battle groups that could be launched at the shortest possible notice (48 to 72 hours) from the launch pads or lodgements provided by the pivot formations. Eight to ten such battle groups are envisaged.

The operational shift is also reflected in continuous day and night operations and close synergy between all arms within the army as also the air force and navy. Operational objectives relate to shallow thrusts of up to 30–50 m to breach the operational depths of holding formations of the adversary and pose a direct threat to its hinterland. Some analysts also look at this doctrinal thinking in terms of quickly massing firepower, together with deep air and naval strikes to deliver a punishing blow to the adversary, degrading its war-waging potential, without any serious damage to population and other civilian centres.

The major focus of the cold start doctrine is simultaneous integrated operations to unhinge the enemy, break its organic cohesion, and paralyse its military leadership in making operational mistakes from which it will find it difficult to recover. The emphasis is on speed of both deployment and operational execution to overcome the disadvantage of operating from exterior lines, and achieve early break-in. The Indian Army is attempting to take advantage of strategic and operational surprise to seek decisions before credible intervention by external powers for early conflict termination. An available window of two to three weeks is presumed as a realistic assessment by the military planners.

The Indian military perceives a number of distinct advantages in the cold start over the earlier doctrines. Firstly, forward deployed formations can be mobilised faster and quicker than unwieldy offensive formations deployed in the heartland. Proximity to the international border helps in reducing the logistic requirements of both the pivot formations and the battle groups, enhancing their manoeuvrability and ability to achieve surprise. Secondly, given the force structures, essentially the operations are likely to remain shallow and within the

perceived nuclear thresholds, thus, denying any credible justification for nuclear sabre-rattling. Yet another perspective of the cold start doctrine is that it allows a range of options to be adopted in any given provocation rather than an all or nothing approach; this, in turn, will allow flexibility for shaping the response at the political level as also the desired end state.

Thirdly, multiple divisional size thrusts stand better chances of quick penetration and upsetting the adversary's organic cohesion through surprise, speed and decision dilemma, akin to the German *blitzkrieg* of 1940. Fourthly, there is a perception that multiple thrust lines are likely to significantly enhance the challenge for the adversary's limited intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to pin-point Indian offensives, thereby, increasing the chances of both tactical and operational surprise. In a limited war, given the fact that overall politico-military goals will be less predictable than, say, in an all out war, defence against Indian multiple thrust lines will be that much more difficult, as military objectives are likely to remain diffused. Lastly, with increasing effect-based capability, it would be possible to degrade the adversary's centres of gravity through what the Chinese call key point strikes.

The broad motivating perspective behind the cold start doctrine is a creative conventional response to Pakistan's support to terrorism as a low cost option vis-a-vis India, as also rejection of India's no first use option. The Indian Army believes that the doctrine supported by the revolution in military affairs (RMA) based technology upgrades and offensive spirit provides the conventional response to state sponsored proxy war while remaining below the nuclear threshold.

Doctrinal Evaluation

Since 2004, five exercises of varying force levels and in different terrain have been held to validate the broad conceptual framework of the doctrine and to test its functional efficacy. The first exercise to evaluate the operational aspects of the doctrine was held in March 2004, called Exercise Divya Astra. The exercise was based on launching mechanised assault against fixed defences, employing integrated combined arms and air power. The second exercise, called Vajra Shakti, was held in May 2005 in the developed terrain of Punjab to exercise pivot

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formations (holding corps) to undertake offensive operations at short notice during the opening phases of hostilities.

The third exercise, called Desert Strike was held in November /December 2005, in Rajasthan, with the stated purpose of testing the ability of the strike corps in the desert to conduct joint operations with the air force, aimed at examining the ability of the Indian military to cause psychological chaos through preemption, dislocation and disruption. Units were tested for their ability to undertake operational manoeuvres in a predominantly electronic and information warfare environment. This was the largest exercise conducted by the army since Exercise Brasstacks in 1987. The most important aspect of the exercise was integrated air-land operations, involving joint air-ground strikes and deep strikes to shape the battlespace for manoeuvre forces.

The fourth exercise in the series was Sanghe Shakti, conducted in the plains of Punjab, to test offensive formations in the tenets of the cold start doctrine. It entailed participation by mechanised and reorganised plains infantry divisions, in a *blitzkrieg* type armoured incursion emphasising rapid penetration, including flank security by attack helicopters. The entire offensive operations were supported by air power employed in both the counter-air and supporting roles. Another exercise was conducted on the same lines, titled Ashwa Medha.

These exercises entailed multi-dimensional capability demonstration, particularly the use of advanced information technologies and communication systems in a battlefield enabled net-centric environment. Real-time situational environment was provided by satellite imagery and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) which carried out all-time tracking of enemy movements, providing near real-time situational awareness, making tactical assessments and decision-making speedier. The integration of sensors and surveillance devices via video and data links in a sensor to shooter link allowed UAVs to detect targets which were destroyed by precision air and artillery fires. Advance technologies imported from Israel, Russia and other countries have greatly contributed to upgradation in the Indian Army's intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. These exercises could be called test beds to evaluate the Indian Army's evolving tactical command, control, communications, intelligence (C3I) systems.

A major advantage accruing from these exercises was increased confidence in the viability of the army's cold start doctrine and considerable reduction in mobilisation of offensive formations. According to estimates as reported in the media and other analytical studies, in Exercise Sanghe Shakti the army's strike corps managed to reduce days, if not weeks, in its mobilisation time. An additional and extremely important perspective of these exercises was that they

were carried out in an environment where nuclear, biological and chemical weapons had been employed, forcing the army to operate in a contaminated environment, giving it the much needed operational experience.

Reaction to Indian Army's Cold Start Doctrine

Going by the reactions, both in the international media and academic research, the Indian Army's new doctrine has drawn considerable attention.

The information coming out from Pakistan through some American analysts is that Pakistan sees this as an extremely disquieting development, attempting to disturb the

existential regional strategic balance. Pakistan appears to be contemplating taking effective steps to deal with the new doctrine that attempts to destabilise its perceived conventional mindset. It is in this context that noises of single rung escalation and breakdown of deterrence stability are beginning to be heard.

Other reasons being touted against the doctrine are based on the premise that the cornerstone of the so-called "*unreal stability*" that exists in the subcontinent is based on the inability of either side to gain decisive political advantages in a conventional war. The significant enhancement in the Indian offensive capability to achieve quick military decisions is likely to upset this balance, forcing Pakistan to either respond conventionally or through lowering of its red lines, by putting its nuclear weapons on higher alert status, developing tactical nuclear weapons, etc.

Walter C Ludwig III, from Oxford University, in an interesting analysis of the Indian Army's limited war cold start doctrine, lists four major challenges for India in operationalising the doctrine. The first relates to crafting a political strategy and objectives that are achievable by the use of military force yet sufficiently limited to ensure that the conflict does not escalate beyond the nuclear threshold. The second relates to the likely Pakistani misperception. Here the classic issue is the Clausewitzian construct of reciprocal engagements; i.e. the need to account for the enemy's capabilities, intentions and perceptions. Thus politico-military objectives that are considered limited by India may not be viewed as such by Islamabad, nor are the likely incentives to prevent

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escalation likely to be the same, leading to premature nuclear sabre rattling and brinkmanship.

The third relates to the challenge posed by the political-military relationship. While the civilian leadership may design an extremely tight and integrated strategy, with clearly defined objectives, there is always the danger of escalation either due to military overreach to exploit opportunities or miscalculations. The fourth relates to the geography of India and Pakistan, in particular Pakistani sensitivity to any major assault that has the potential to split the country or pose a major danger to its important infrastructural and population centres. The perception is that the above calculations could lead to uncontrolled escalation in the backdrop of the nuclear overhang.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the above concerns, there can be no doubt that the cold start doctrine is a viable response to Pakistan's proxy war strategy of bleeding India. It represents a significant advance in India's conventional capabilities. Analyses of the recent exercises indicate that the requisite organisational and conceptual changes are being effected to make the doctrine a viable response option. Concerns like the politico-military disconnect and rapid escalation are all predicated on the relative conventional and strategic balance. Pakistan is likely to remain engaged on the western front in the immediate future, thus, to an extent restraining its operational stance on the Indian front. This allows India time to fine tune the doctrine, operationally as also politically, wherein political objectives get subsumed within the doctrine.