

India Needs Sea-based ‘Active’ Deterrence against State-Sponsored Terrorism

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In early-March 2015, the Indian government created a new post of Additional Director General (ADG), Indian Coast Guard (ICG). The ADG has been assigned the responsibility for coastal security off India’s western seaboard, comprising the coastal provincial States of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands and the Union Territory of Daman and Diu. Coming in the wake of the reported interception of the Pakistan-based suspect terrorist boat off Gujarat coast on the New Years day and the ensuing developments, it indicates that the Indian security establishment is thinking hard how to secure its western frontiers against state-sponsored terrorism.

Ever since Pakistan opted for proxy war strategy – leading to the Kargil Conflict (1999) and Mumbai terror strikes (2008) – the asymmetric threats to India have increased manifold. The rise of religious fundamentalism in West Asia coupled with *Al Qaeda*’s intent to shift their operations to the Indian sub-continent could encourage the Pakistan-supported terrorist groups to target India across its land or maritime frontiers. Following the September 2014 incident involving the unsuccessful bid by *Al Qaeda* operatives to hijack PNS *Zulfiqar*, the Indian Navy placed its warships on high alert. The alert was prudent since a maritime-terror strike may have been planned against India concurrently.

Besides the organisational revamp (as indicated by creating a new designation of ADG, ICG), a comprehensive response to the emerging threat may involve a re-appraisal of ‘concepts’ and the attendant ‘capabilities’. This essay aims to propose a reorientation in this direction.

Concept of ‘Deterrence’

Conventional deterrence is meant to prevent military aggression against own country by convincing a potential aggressor that resorting to force is not cost-effective, and thus not an option. Traditionally, India has resorted to a ‘passive’ form of deterrence. It seeks to deny the gains to the potential adversary, regardless of the cost (deterrence by ‘denial’). It involves maintaining an implicit, though credible military capability, strategy and readiness. Since the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, a full-scale armed conflict has not been thrust upon India. This indicates that India’s ‘passive’ deterrence has been effective to prevent a conventional war.

However, such deterrence has been ineffective against Pakistan’s proxy war strategy involving the use of terrorism “to bleed India through a thousand cuts”, which led to the Kargil Conflict in 1999, and the subsequent intrusions by Pakistan-based terrorist groups into India via the land and sea routes.

Conceptually, therefore, India may need to shift from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ deterrence. ‘Active’ deterrence requires the possession of a robust military capability for retaliation, and a commensurate overt politico-military posture that assures the potential aggressor of unacceptably high costs. If a mere ‘possession’ of retaliatory capability is insufficient, India could even resort to ‘deterrence by punishment’. Also known as the concept of ‘compellance’, it entails infliction of escalatory punishment upon the opponent by effecting damage and destruction, with the threat of continued use of force until the opponent acquiesces to the demands. It is however, important to note that in the concept of ‘compellance’, the application of punitive military force needs to be carefully calibrated to prevent the outbreak of an armed conflict. This is particularly essential in case of Pakistan that brandishes its nuclear weapons capability – including tactical nukes – on every opportune moment.

The Question of ‘Capability’

Over the years, India has been severely affected by Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Assuming that New Delhi does mobilize the political will to opt for ‘active deterrence’, it would need to address the question of ‘capability’. Since the Mumbai terror strikes of 2008, the capabilities of the Indian maritime forces are being augmented progressively. These range from additions of new surface and air platforms for policing and surveillance, to incorporation of technological ‘force-multipliers’ like coastal radar and Automatic Identification System (AIS) stations and

the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) for enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the coastal zones. However, all these are defensive capabilities optimised for coastal security; and at best, cater for limited ‘passive’ deterrence.

For ‘active’ deterrence, India may need to augment its retaliatory capability in a manner that it can also effectively control escalation. Naval forces can deliver a retaliatory strike from anywhere in the international waters and from all dimensions of that space (surface, sub-surface and air). Furthermore, by virtue of its inherent attributes of flexibility and poise, naval power can be applied in a restrained or covert manner – through surgical or precision strikes – to effectively limit its escalation to within the threshold of armed conflict. Hence, the Indian Navy offers a viable option to the political leadership shift from ‘deterrence by denial’ against Pakistan to ‘deterrence by punishment’.

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