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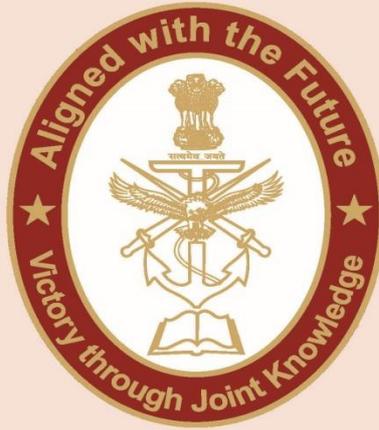
ESCALATION MANAGEMENT: EMERGING TEMPLATES FROM GLOBAL HOTSPOTS

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The 2019 Balakot incident, Iran-Pakistan duels in January 2024 and the very recent Israel-Iran direct conflict in April 2024 witnessed a calibrated escalation and de-escalation. The escalation control mechanisms in these incidents were primarily driven by the pulls and pressures from the Clausewitzian 'trinity' of the government, military and the populace. This analysis provides insights into the nuanced balancing of this 'trifecta' for escalation management undertaken by these countries and offers potent lessons for the future.

In recent years, commencing with India's Balakot air strikes on terror training camps in Pakistan, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in 2020, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, tensions between Pakistan and Iran, the Israel-Hamas conflict and the very recent Israel-Iran clashes in April this year, intriguing aspects of conflict escalation and management have emerged. While one extreme of the spectrum led to full-fledged wars between Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas, the other extreme witnessed a calibrated escalation and exit strategy. This article will aim to decode the common threads of calibrated escalation in the Balakot incident, the Iran-Pakistan skirmishes and the most recent Israel-Iran incident through the framework of Clausewitzian 'trinity'.

- **India-Pakistan: Balakot-2019** In response to the terror attack in Pulwama in 2019, on 26 February 2019, the IAF launched air strikes targeting the biggest JeM terror camp in Balakot inflicting substantial casualties,ⁱ however, Pakistan termed it 'a very precise miss'.ⁱⁱ The Indian MEA statement clarified that the strikes were intelligence-based pre-emptive actions launched on non-military

targets in unpopulated areas to avoid civilian casualties.ⁱⁱⁱ On 27 February 2019, PAF retaliated with stand-off strikes in the Rajouri sector, intentionally bombing away from important targets.^{iv} Pakistan Foreign Office statement mentioned that the strikes were carried out at “non-military targets, avoiding human loss and collateral damage to demonstrate our right, will and capability for self-defense and that we have no intention of escalation but are fully prepared to do so if forced into that paradigm.”^v The PAF strikes did not cause any damage or casualties,^{vi} while the aerial dogfight led to the downing of the PAF F-16; in doing so, IAF pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan had to eject and was held in Pakistan’s custody, released two days later.^{vii} Political dispensations in both countries subsequently used public messaging to signal that the military actions had achieved their desired end.^{viii}

- **Iran-Pakistan-2024** In January 2024, Iran launched a series of air and drone attacks on what Iran claimed to be the headquarters of a group called Jaish ul-Adl, or Army of Justice, which clamour for the independence of Sistan and Baluchistan province in Iran.^{ix} Retaliating two days later, Pakistan targeted the Baluchistan Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front in Iran.^x As per Pakistan, these groups have primarily targeted security forces in Baluchistan and Chinese nationals, particularly those involved in the construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan.^{xi} The motives for the strikes for Iran and Pakistan are believed to be mounting internal pressures for action. Interestingly, both countries reaffirmed their ‘brotherly’ relations after Pakistan's retaliation,^{xii} keeping the escalation below the threshold.
- **Iran-Israel-2024** Iran and Israel usually have been shadowboxing, but they confronted each other directly in April this year. On 01 April 2024, Israel targeted the Iranian consular building in Damascus, killing senior officers of IRGC.^{xiii} Iran, meanwhile, warned of retaliation and struck after almost a fortnight on 13 April with vectors comprising approx 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles and at least 110 ballistic missiles.^{xiv} Reportedly, 99% of these vectors were effectively intercepted by the air defence systems of Israel and allies within and outside Israeli air space. A couple of ballistic missiles that evaded interception had reportedly impacted near an F-35 fighter jet base at Nevatim air base in the Negev desert in southern Israel, believed to be Iran's primary target. On the other hand, despite US restraint, after sufficient retaliatory warning, Israel reciprocated with limited missile strikes on 19 April. Interestingly, the limited strike avoided significant damage, attenuating the likelihood of further escalation. As per reports, Israel's retaliation involved non-intrusive air strikes employing stand-off missiles integrated with quadcopters to confuse the air defence systems. Reportedly, one missile hit an anti-aircraft battery in the city of Isfahan in central Iran, which houses significant military infrastructure including a large air base, a major missile production complex and several nuclear facilities. Another missile exploded in mid-air.^{xv} Iran, though, officially confirmed the attempted strikes and downplayed them, stating that Israel “only made a failed and humiliating attempt to fly quadcopters (drones) and the quadcopters have also been shot down.”^{xvi}

Theorising the Context - Clausewitz's 'Trinity' The above incidents may be viewed from the theoretical prism of Clausewitz's 'trinity' of violence and emotions (population), chance and probability (the military) and government and the rational calculation (government). As per Clausewitz, maintaining a balance between the three elements is critical to succeed in any war. This conceptual insight is relevant in full-fledged war and even in actions short of war.

- **India-Pakistan (Balakot)**

- Both countries launched air strikes to assuage domestic sentiments. For India, the domestic pressure grew after the Pulwama attack, further inflamed by the media in the run up to the general elections of 2019. Pakistan's reciprocal strike aimed primarily at domestic audience while playing down the effectiveness of the IAF strike as "a very precise miss".^{xvii}
- The military target chosen by the IAF clearly signalled intent, demonstrating the political resolve to retaliate in a calibrated manner. The PAF's retaliatory strike was an offset strike, symbolic in nature.
- Based on the rational calculation of war, both countries managed escalation by weighing the costs of further escalation. With the return of Wing Commander Abhinandan, India met its set military and political objectives, while the Pakistani military (Pakistan Army) reasserted its position as the ideological guardian through its response.

- **Iran-Pakistan**

- While analysing the escalation dynamics, Iran's missile strikes were intended as a possible show of intent and display of capabilities to re-establish deterrence for the consumption of stakeholders in the Middle East and the domestic audience. Iran was already under pressure for action due to the Islamic State attack in South Eastern Iran, which killed 84 people,^{xviii} Israel's war on Iran's ally, Hamas and wider unrest against its theocracy.^{xix} Pakistan's motive aimed to appease domestic sentiments and restore "public perception of the Army" amid severe political, economic and social stress.
- From the military point of view, both countries deliberately targeted insurgent groups. This sub-strategic selection of targets has been instrumental in calibrating escalation.
- On the rational calculations of the cost of war, both countries declared 'brotherly relations'^{xx} immediately after the strikes, thereby restricting further escalation and showcasing calculated measures to manage risks of further escalation.

- **Israel-Iran**
 - Iran was primarily driven by domestic and political compulsion to retaliate after the strike on IRGC officials in Damascus, the first direct strike on Israeli soil. Similarly, Israel, already swirling under domestic pressure from the Hamas attack, felt compelled to retaliate despite US pressures.
 - Iran and Israel demonstrated a calibrated military action to avoid significant damage while demonstrating their capabilities. Iran, as expected, with an integrated drone-missile force, selectively targeted the Nevatim air base in the Negev desert in southern Israel to display intent without causing damage after due warning. Israel retaliated after adequate warning with limited vectors to display its capability to strike at the very heart of Iran in Isfahan province.
 - Both governments gave adequate warning before the strikes and calibrated the damage to prevent further escalation. This measured approach by both countries displays a calculated strategy to determine the cost of continued conflict, thereby de-escalating.

Emerging Escalation Management Template

- **Assuaging Domestic Sentiments in a Digitised Environment** Domestic compulsions, especially in democratic countries, compel governments to act due to the pressures of the digitised environment. The media frenzy, compounded by the rapid spread of information/disinformation, has the potential to sway public opinion and put the government under pressure to react in an escalatory manner.
- **Selection of Military Targets & Measured Hard Power Response** In the conflicts discussed above, calibrated selection of military targets and measured hard power response have emerged as a common thread to balance intent, capability and escalation. Coupled with target selection, tweaked strike potency was designed to display intent without provocation.
- **Optics from Non-Contact Kinetic Measures as 'Victory Markers'** In all cases, non-contact kinetic vectors such as air strikes, missiles and drones were employed, as these provide visible evidence of action, as 'victory markers' for narrative war, meant for domestic and international consumption. At the same time, governments tend to overlook non-contact non-kinetic measures in the virtual domain due to lack of visibility and optics to gain an upper hand in narrative war.
- **Waning Influence of Third-Party Mediation** The influence of traditional third-party mediation in crisis appears to be on the downward slide, as evidenced by the cases discussed. The trend demonstrates a mistrust of external intervention, a clamour for direct control over the outcomes and a more self-reliant approach to conflict resolution.

Lessons for Indian 'Trinity'

- **Managing Domestic Sentiments (Population)**
 - Pumped-up domestic sentiments that rally behind strong political intent must be attenuated by deft political handling and avoid succumbing to media-driven fervour.
 - At the same time, popular sentiments should also be leveraged to project national unity, by orchestrating a narrative of cohesiveness and preparedness to positively influence escalation dynamics. Politico-strategic leaders must weigh the situation rationally and rally public support either way, to align responses with the long-term national interest.
- **Whole of the Nation Approach (Government)** A 'Whole of the Nation' effort is warranted to synchronise the efforts of all instruments of national power for a synergised effect.
 - Diplomacy plays a key role in crisis diffusion as well as in charting out a 'respectable exit strategy'. MEA efforts must focus on diplomatic outcomes to assuage sentiments by managing escalation and avoiding misunderstandings while ensuring national interest.
 - In the information domain, the government machinery, as well as ADG (PI), should progressively shape the narrative, provide accurate information, counter misinformation, steer and craft perceptions and not wait for the crisis situation, to react. This should be an ongoing process.
- **Military**
 - **Prioritise Non-Contact Non-Kinetic Options** 'Body bags' evoke national sentiments, clamouring for further retributory action. To pacify emotions and retain escalation dominance, non-contact non-kinetic options in the virtual domains should be prioritised. Information campaigns aligned with 'Whole of the Nation' efforts, leveraging strong narratives buttressing potential victory markers, should be explored to achieve strategic objectives.
 - **Non-Contact Kinetic Options** Intrusive air actions are potentially escalatory and embedded with risks. Therefore, greater reliance on other non-contact kinetic options like missiles, drones and stand-off weapons for non-intrusive air strikes to mitigate escalation risks should be explored along the escalatory ladder as strategic signalling tools.
 - **Exit Strategies** Exit strategies at every potential escalation ladder are critical for the operational and tactical commanders. Pre-planned and well-defined escalation management strategies will ensure escalation within the desired scope while paving the way for de-escalation as well. Calibrated sub-strategic target selection, therefore, becomes essential in the non-contact

kinetic domain. This strategic foresight will facilitate suitable target selection as well as a measured response to meet the military and resultant political objectives.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's 'trinity' continues to sway in present-day situations, and the trinity must be balanced for favourable outcomes. A bias towards any of the triad is likely to upset the balance. Escalation management is expected to become complex in future conflicts. Therefore, countries need to read the emerging templates to address domestic sentiments, select suitable military targets with sub-strategic significance, measure responses and exploit visible victory markers to win the narrative war. This approach enables countries to manage escalation effectively, achieving political and military objectives while avoiding the costs and consequences of protracted conflict.

DISCLAIMER

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Endnotes

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