

Backdrop for bilateral
talks

India exercises military muscle



Rodney W. Jones

 [PRINT THIS ARTICLE](#)

Preparedness is a modern military watchword, inculcated by military exercises. Military forces must train in realistic conditions to identify flaws, buy time to correct them, and be confident they can perform in crisis or war. But seen in the backdrop to the forthcoming Delhi summit, India's military exercise Poorna Vijay (Total Victory) early in May seems to have had a diplomatic and theatrical resonance that goes beyond its routine military rationale.

Grand offense and defense requires coordination of ground, air, and usually naval services, along with instruments of military intelligence. Achieving this in large, functionally diverse armed forces is demanding: coordinating ground combat alone means integrating armor, infantry, artillery, missilery, helicopter assault, paratroops, anti-aircraft, and engineers. Requirements are far more formidable if an overlay of weapons of mass destruction is planned for. So exercising is a prudent responsibility.

India's regular armed forces were big even in the 1970s (about 1.1 million in 1980). Today they are a fifth larger, but more important, they have become more diverse mechanically, heavier in firepower, and have longer reach. As other military powers have scaled back since the Cold War, India's current regular armed forces of 1.3 million have risen in rank order. They now surpass Russia's currently active level of about 1 million (a four-fold reduction from Soviet days) and have reached virtual par with the United States' 1.36 million. India's forces remain numerically inferior only to China's, whose current level of 2.4 million itself has shrunk by roughly half

since 1980.

In comparison, Pakistan is geographically challenged with little defense depth. Hence, Pakistan is three times more heavily armed per capita than India, with about 610,000 active soldiers. Overall, this means a 2:1 ratio in India's favor. But manpower numbers do not translate directly into speed, firepower, or combat effectiveness. India's ambitious military modernization has yielded qualitative offensive superiority over Pakistan nearer to 4:1 in air and naval, and 3:1 in ground combat capabilities. Moreover, India's evolving space and airborne intelligence assets and access to sophisticated arms, particularly from Russia, seem likely to enlarge these gaps.

Widening military asymmetry between India and Pakistan is itself a destabilizing factor. It makes escalation to nuclear war from a major military crisis or conventional hostilities plausible. Surprisingly, India's major arms suppliers, Russia primarily, but also Israel and the United States, are exacerbating that instability by their arms sales. India's routine military exercises are normal, but their scale lays bare this widening asymmetry and thus exerts dangerous pressure on Pakistan.

Also alarming is the "offensive" focus of India's large military exercises. Ordinary "defense," taking easy advantage of India's enormous strategic depth, gets a back seat. The underlying offensive concept of rapid mobilization and armored maneuver (like the Nazi blitzkrieg) first surfaced in India's "Brass Tacks" military exercises in 1986-87. Brass Tacks was the first grand integration of forces at the corps level (50,000 to 60,000 troops) in feigned multi-pronged invasion of Pakistan from Rajasthan and Punjab. The new technical challenge then was using long-range field communications to coordinate armored and infantry maneuvers on a theater scale.

India thereafter conducted other major military exercises to demonstrate theater-wide offensive coordination. Shiv Shakti (Divine Power) in December 1998, for example, combined all services, including the Navy, in exercises in Rajasthan and Gujarat. But Poorna Vijay (Total Victory) in May 2001 was the first large-scale exercise to be advertised as designed for nuclear war conditions, and to support preemptive special forces attack against unconventional weapons beyond the battlefield. It seemed to give operational content to preemptive first strike concepts woven into the so-called draft "Indian nuclear doctrine" of August 1999. Prepared by an officially convened committee of strategic experts, this document advocated declaring a nuclear posture and deploying a triad of nuclear forces.

Since the contents of this so-called nuclear doctrine were not formally adopted as policy and evidence to date suggests that neither India nor Pakistan has physically deployed nuclear weapons, and since the Indian military hierarchy has not even been given custody over nuclear weapons, one might ask why India advertised Poorna Vijay as a nuclear war exercise. One has to wonder whether at bottom this exercise was political theater or an instrument of coercive diplomacy.

Several cumulative political and diplomatic motivations would fit the circumstances we see today. India has relished ambiguous positions on nuclear capability since the late 1960s, and especially since the first nuclear explosive demonstration of 1974 – tiptoeing towards declared nuclear weapons but never quite getting there until its May 1998 tests. Today, India is ostensibly moving towards deployment, but has not yet crossed definitive lines. Ambiguous policies serve multiple interests and enable different messages to different audiences.

Domestic audiences are the Indian national security elite and the public at large. The BJP appears to be conditioning the elite to continue exploiting the policy of nuclear capability for diplomatic and political purposes. As long as it is very costly to fully deploy nuclear weapons, long-range delivery means are still being tested, and no nuclear threat to India is active or urgent, why hurry to hand nuclear weapons over to the military? If diplomatic leverage can be obtained from the West or from China and Pakistan by preserving ambiguity, why not do so?

As for the public at large, the BJP is eliciting attitudes that reflect its own realpolitik preferences in foreign relations, possibly aiming to discredit views and habits associated with the Congress Party and leftists in general. This is not to say the BJP leadership is singularly hawkish or ideologically rigid, merely that it is capable of acting decisively where it believes India's interests coincide with measures that bolster its own political base.

To Pakistan, Poorna Vijay sends several messages. "Total victory" symbolizes Indian readiness to subjugate or pacify Pakistan absolutely and unconditionally. The form of the exercises themselves suggest that were Pakistan to brandish nuclear capabilities during hostilities, India plans to take them out, undeterred by any prospect of Pakistani tactical nuclear use. These are messages, of course, not proof that India could or would execute such plans if the balloon goes up. They may convey red lines intended to constrain the options Pakistani leadership could consider viable during crises, and to deter adventurism.

Between the lines, Poorna Vijay is suggestive of indirect probing of

Pakistani nuclear operational plans, hoping to elicit Pakistani debate, which might provide clues to how the Pakistani high command currently thinks it would respond to Indian invasion and commando attacks behind the lines. Would Pakistan be drawn into tactical use of nuclear weapons? This would be inadvisable, possibly suicidal. It could justify Indian tactical counter-use that almost certainly would be strategically crippling for Pakistan, yet leave India strategically unscathed. But how well understood is this in Pakistan, even inside the Army high command?

Was Poorna Vijay a message to Westerners? It got little press outside the subcontinent. But some insiders follow these events. What would they have gleaned from the exercise? That Pakistan and India might really engage in a tactical nuclear slugfest? In that event, are Western insiders tempted to believe in, or sympathize with, Indian plans to take out Pakistani nukes using commandos and surgical air strikes? Would they buy the view that India's increasing conventional asymmetry vis-à-vis Pakistan is a benign rather than destabilizing condition?

A flip side of this message would be that India is interested in nuclear stability, but Pakistan is a serious obstacle. This invites Westerners to view operational nuclear stability as a logical component of the so-called strategic dialogue between India and the United States. While a parallel U.S. dialogue with both Pakistan and India might be useful, if it derives from such a lop-sided image of the two sides, it may be fruitful only for India, sterile for Pakistan, and in a more traditional U.S. perspective, perversely destabilizing. Pakistan would best avoid statements and actions that could lend credence to India's tactical nuclear scenario.

India's messages gain ground in the West when accompanied by overtures to negotiate with Pakistan or by signs that India's top leaders are rethinking the Kashmir problem. Vajpayee is nationally popular and respected as one of India's most inventive and least self-interested statesmen. He might be able to support an approach to Kashmir that breaks with the past. He may even hanker to leave a world legacy. But even if this overestimates his role, India's current course of seeking favor both with the United States (to ease sanctions, secure tacit recognition as a nuclear power and win support for eventual permanent UN Security Council membership) and Russia (to obtain, also, sophisticated arms and nuclear cooperation at bargain rates) virtually requires that it take the high road in dealing with Pakistan. The opening should be taken seriously.

Pakistan's agenda is less grandiose in the post-Cold War scenario. But it does hope for release from U.S. economic and military sanctions and seeks positive relations with the West that may help stimulate a return of economic vigor. It needs political space to get on with the job of building the

country. Mainstream sentiment in Pakistan has gradually adopted somewhat greater flexibility on a resolution of the Kashmir dispute and greater willingness to ascertain the wishes of the Kashmiri peoples. Pakistan's own commitment to constructive results is more likely to be firm and yield durable results when the military has one of its own leaders in the driver's seat, as is the case today.

Pakistan has an important national stake in relief from an escalating Indian military buildup and the burden of an endless arms race. This seems to be clear even to the military hierarchy. Durable solutions through negotiations with India never could be achieved by what the mainstream on either side regards as a complete sell-out. Finding a common ground just might be possible now, however, given patience, clear-sightedness and consistency. Movement on this track should dissipate hard-line illusions on either side that "total victory" is anything but a melodramatic fiction.

Dr. Rodney W. Jones is President of Policy Architects International in Reston, VA. He is an expert on nuclear security issues who has lived in both India and Pakistan and published extensively on South Asia.

 [PRINT THIS ARTICLE](#)
