

India's Military Strategy in Kargil: Lessons in Restraint and Deterrence

Wednesday, August, 2022, 4:00 pm – 5:30 pm (IST)

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the ninth edition of its Foreign Policy & Security Tiffin Talk series with **Dr. Arzan Tarapore**, Research Scholar at The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, on his ongoing research on **India's Military Strategy in Kargil: Lessons in Restraint and Deterrence**.
- The lead discussants were **Lt. Gen. (Dr.) Rakesh Sharma**, Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda Foundation (VIF) and **Dr. Anit Mukherjee**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP, the Deputy Head of Graduate Studies, and an Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.
- The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow Foreign Policy and Security, CSEP. The participation included retired and serving officials from the military, academia, scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities, and members of the media.
- The Tiffin Talk Series features scholars presenting their recent, evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.

The culture of restraint

Does the Kargil war offer evidence that conflict in nuclear South Asia will be marked by restraint and deterrence? Did it set a precedent for India as a responsible nuclear power for the international community? What conditions shaped Indian wartime strategy and what does this mean for the future? Dr. Arzan Tarapore delved into these questions and set the context for the discussion while presenting his research findings. It was highlighted that the Kargil war has long been referred to as an example of restraint and nuclear deterrence as India was operating under the nuclear umbrella after the nuclear tests (Operation Shakti) of

1998. This also marked a watershed event concerning India's international image as a new nuclear power. Tarapore's work invites us to assess whether Kargil stands to reason as a fitting example of restraint and nuclear deterrence, arguing that while India might be restrained and deterred in the future, the example of Kargil – and most recently also the Balakot crisis “offers no assurances.”

Tarapore noted that the conditions that drove Indian restraint in the Kargil war no longer apply. In 1999, the military strategy was politically restrained as India was

ving for international support, primarily from the US. As a result, the government directed that the military not cross the Line of Control as it sought to evict the intruders. The same is no longer the case as India is less sensitive to international support. A participant also noted that Kargil was not the first instance of restraint in India's military strategy and that in fact "restraint is a culture that comes from the time of independence." It was also suggested and echoed by many of the participants that 2002 (Operation Parakram) and 2008 (post 26/11 Mumbai attacks) might serve as additional instances of assessing India's restraint and nuclear deterrence. However, another participant also emphasised that it was important to define 'restraint.' For instance, India did launch an offensive to Lahore and Kasur in Pakistan during the 1965 war, and in 1971, India went against the interest of the United States and a largely hostile global environment.

India's military strategy

Tarapore laid out his definition of strategy as a theory of victory and described India as a status quo-ist state. He discussed a consistent pattern in India's military strategy of "using minor leverages to restore status quo ante" mainly in the form of territorial gains. He discussed how military strategy is a result of the leadership's perception of geopolitical risks along with the military's preferred solutions to mitigate these risks. Describing, in the case of India, that the risk involved in fighting a war have generally been perceived as high and restraint is as much a result of the military's preferred solutions.

Sharply diverging on the issue of restraint being tied to the military's preferences, one of the participants stated that there has been "a history of political restraint" which has shaped India's military strategy. This sentiment was resonant among several participants, with one of them stating that restraint has been an "intrinsic value" in India's military and political psyche with India "never having gone into conflicts unless compelled to." One of the participants raised the question of assessing whether restraint in India's military strategy was a result of compulsion, capability, or policy. Tarapore noted that restraint includes all and would vary with the scenario.

The absent dialogue

Several references were made to Dr. Anit Mukherjee's book, *The Absent Dialogue*, stating that there was not much engagement between the politicians, bureaucrats, and military, nor within the three wings of the military. It was argued that the political leadership follows the "logic of political hands-off to military strategy" while they are the ones laying out the larger goals required to be achieved by the military. A participant flagged the importance of being aware of who, those in decision-making positions, were choosing to restrain, both domestically and internationally. While another commented on being aware of the state's role in crafting the military strategy and decisions.

This led to further discussion among the panellists on the inaccessibility of military and political archives and records. An absent dialogue has been hindering not only the production of rigorous academic research but also historical awareness in the military and political cadre. Agreeing with the importance of ensuring more extensive declassification of historical records, one participant cautioned that other sources can be deceptive as the "truth is the first tragedy in war."

The way forward

In light of events such as the Ukraine war, the current situation along the Line of Actual Control between India and China, and the escalation in the Taiwan strait, participants deliberated over the future of India's military strategy. Many suggested that political restraint will continue to articulate military strategy unless concrete action is taken to make changes. Referring to Prime Minister Modi's desire to modernise the military, a participant stated that India's military strategy could continue to be restrained and deterred if there was no political will to pursue a bolder policy. Several present at the discussion also pointed out the change in theatres of conflict and thresholds, with territorial gains not being the only version of victory in contemporary conflict.

While India's position in the international order has significantly changed since the Kargil war, becoming more self-assured, assessing India's military strategy will require an eye to the future with an ear to the past.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

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