

The cult of operational superiority, from Israel to India

Israel's prevailing security policy has collapsed. For decades it projected a mirage of ruthless sophistication, as it repeatedly and confidently cut its Palestinian enemies down to size. But the unspeakable horrors of October 7, 2023 have prompted a visceral retaliation in Gaza, that brings still-unknown risks of escalation on other fronts, and the unprecedented suffering of innocent civilians that will ricochet through generations. The catastrophe should prompt a fundamental rethink of Israel's strategic concepts – and carries dire warnings for India, too.

Managing rather than solving

Every couple of years, starting in 2008, Israel launched limited air campaigns into Gaza, to degrade the military capabilities – from rocket launchers to tunnels – of Hamas and other militants. Every couple of years, it would kill and destroy just enough of Hamas's people and power to keep the rockets silenced, and the threat contained. A tenuous peace would return to the skies over Israel. This strategic "concept" based on periodic attrition seemed to work. But in fact Israel's military virtuosity masked the reality that its approach was bereft of a political plan.

Israel was managing, not seeking to solve, the problem of Palestinian resistance, from which its terrorist enemies sprouted.

In parallel with the routine military campaigns, the government of Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu abandoned the two-state solution and actively undermined it. His cynical ploy was to sabotage politics, by strengthening extremists such as Hamas at the expense of more credible and popular Palestinian forces, especially the Palestinian Authority (PA) that nominally ran the West Bank. Mr. Netanyahu sought to keep the Palestinians hopelessly divided, the PA weak, and to thereby stall the political process for addressing the Israel-Palestine dispute. And he succeeded.

Managing a strategic threat through purely military means can work – until the adversary finds a way in. Israel's strategic concept of periodic attrition only ever addressed Palestinian groups' capabilities, never their political intent. It was based on an assumption of unassailable



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Israeli power – a belief that operational superiority alone can deliver strategic effects.

Indeed Israel's operational superiority does provide something of a guarantee – Hamas poses no existential threat to Israel. But short of that, as Hamas showed on October 7, a weaker and highly resolved enemy can still inflict untold physical harm, let alone massive national dislocation. Relying on a cult of operational superiority, while ignoring the problem's political roots, invites the adversary to hold fast to its unshakeable beliefs, cling to violence as the only mode of politics, and to keep trying until it finally lands a meaningful blow.

This should sound familiar to Indian ears.

India's handling of Pakistan

For almost a decade, aside from some initial feelers, the Narendra Modi government has treated Pakistan as little more than an irritant to an unstoppable rising India. In defence matters, this has included some commendable efforts. Facing a more urgent threat on the China border, in 2021 India resuscitated the Line of Control ceasefire, and it re-tasked a dedicated Pakistan-facing Strike Corps to the China border. More could be done to right-size the military's focus on Pakistan, which, for decades, has been a sink of resources and military attention.

But India was also seduced by the cult of operational superiority. Just as in Israel's case, the core of this concept suggests that a more powerful actor can apply periodic attrition to manage its threats. India has procured new technologies such as the SPICE (Smart, Precise Impact, Cost-Effective) missiles, adopted new punitive attack options such as in Balakot, and may even be involved in the mysterious assassinations of several anti-India terrorist leaders in Pakistan. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, some or all of these impressive capabilities are products of India's closer relationship with Israel. They make India stronger; but by themselves they only enable successful tactics, not effective strategy.

Meanwhile, India has rejected the notion of addressing the threat politically. New Delhi abrogated Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous

status in 2019, signalling that the Kashmir dispute is now irrevocably non-negotiable, and maintains that it will not reopen talks with Pakistan as long as cross-border terrorism exists. This seems like a reasonable position. India has a thriving economy, is diplomatically courted by the world, and brims with the promise of technology-fuelled dynamism. Why should it get bogged down in a torturous process, full of spoilers, where any deal may not be enforceable?

The answer lies in Israel. Ignoring the political interests at the heart of a rivalry only invites the adversary to dig in and try harder.

A political process may have dividends

Dialogue will not extinguish the Pakistan Army's entrenched anti-India ideology, and even less, the fervour of its terrorist allies. But détente has broken out among inveterate rivals before – including between Israel and its older Arab enemies, most recently Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Pakistan's Army and political elite could conceivably gain a stake in at least calming tensions with India and distancing themselves from extremist groups. They have incentives in buttressing economic stability, building capacity to counter anti-state terrorism, and reducing their dependence on China.

A grand bargain may be elusive, but starting a political process could address a range of pressing issues, from nuclear and missile confidence-building measures, to coordination on Afghanistan, and opening the spigot on trade and investment.

We have seen, in the past month, the costs of ignoring politics. A weaker and highly-resolved adversary can still cause untold harm. The cult of operational superiority has produced only more intractable insecurity for Israel, more devastating loss for Gazans, and possibly ripples of war across the region. Next to India, Pakistan is in the midst of seemingly endless internal tumult, and hosts a rolling soup of violent extremism. And it has nuclear weapons. By all means, New Delhi must maintain and reinforce deterrence through the full spectrum of conflict. But managing a strategic threat through purely military means works only until the adversary finds a way in.