

# Dueling Book Review

*Book reviews, as a genre, haven't had much innovation in quite some time. For some reviewers, that allows entrenched, encrusted practices that doesn't make for substantial or helpful reading. Such crustiness can also permit reviews that are a bit too promotional, laden with superlatives written by superfans or personal attestations to an author's credibility, rather than conveying a realistic assessment of the author's work and its contribution. Dueling Reviews strives to address those issues. In Dueling Reviews, the reader will find two reviewers offering competing perspectives on the value of the book. Dueling Reviews force the reader to consider both perspectives then make their own assessment.*

## *Operation Cactus: Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988* by Sanjay Badri-Maharaj

Reviewed by<sup>1</sup>  
Lt Col Ann-Kristine H. Thrift  
U.S. Air Force

The Indo-Pacific is a region in which religion, global energy, politics, navies, and nation-states vie for power, and the American military remains dangerously ignorant. In his monograph *Operation Cactus: Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988*, Sanjay Badri-Maharaj provides a glimpse into the politics and military capabilities of the India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives triangle. Operation Cactus was the Indian military's intervention on behalf of the Maldives government to prevent a coup. At the time it was the largest out of area deployment of the Indian military. The sixty-six-page monograph sprinkles kernels of regional political-military insight between an overview of military capabilities and an understanding of Indian strategic goals while telling the adrenaline-pumping story of Indian intervention in the Maldives.

Reviewed by<sup>2</sup>  
Wg Cdr Simon Batt  
Royal Air Force

*Operation Cactus* describes the 1988 Indian intervention in the Maldives to suppress a coup by a renegade group of Tamil insurgents. The operation was an unprecedented, ambitious, and rapid out-of-area intervention by a defensively equipped, trained, and organized Indian military. The operation showcases the mindset, capabilities, and ambition of a strong regional power in the Indo-Pacific, with obvious parallels today, focusing on the operational and largely logistical challenges the Indian forces faced. The book posed high potential to learn more about the Indian military and gain a greater strategic understanding of the region and its history that largely went unfulfilled.

*Operation Cactus* is part of a larger series of studies into military endeavors in Asia and a broader canon covering Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. With thirty-seven publications in the Asia series alone, the format is clearly popular. The book covers

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

<sup>2</sup> The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

One third of the monograph is dedicated to describing Indian military forces. While likely mundane and uninteresting for those who want to get to the action, it is a valuable resource for military planners who can reference the pages as a ready-made military portion of the intelligence preparation of the environment. The monograph is also full of black and white pictures of military equipment with descriptions of capabilities. Though the monograph covers the 1988 intervention, Badri-Maharaj includes the current Indian military order of battle throughout his descriptions, which is helpful to the military planner in determining interoperability for combined operations.

The background Badri-Maharaj provides concerning Indian strategic goals is likely of most interest to the military planner. India is no stranger to conflict. The country has been combating insurgencies and border disputes since its independence in 1947. Through the 1960s and 1970s, India viewed China as its primary adversary but remained a defensive military. The majority of militaries in the world are defensive, not offensive, which changes their capabilities and risk calculus. By the 1980s, Indian politicians began seeking ways to project power. They found their opportunity to exert regional influence first in involvement in Sri Lanka and then intervention in the Maldives. Badri-Maharaj uses plain language but somewhat choppy organization to link the two interventions together.

The last third of the monograph detailing preparations for the coup and India's reaction makes the initial slog worthwhile. Reality is truly more entertaining than fiction. The 1988 attempted coup lasted less than forty-eight hours and included eighty insurgents. By the end of Operation Cactus approximately 2,500 Indian military forces were deployed to the Maldives. The events leading to the coup read like a sitcom. A poultry farmer hires Tamil mercenaries from Sri Lanka to stage a coup in the Maldives.

a broad swath of topics, from the strategic environment through individual tactical maneuvers. The book opens with a précis of the historical, cultural, political, and military context before providing a lengthy, highly detailed, and jargon-filled exposition of the Indian military capability. An account of the operational and logistical preparation follows, highlighting the typical fog and friction and the resourceful adaption and innovation to deliver results. Clausewitz's trinity also implicitly raises its head. The book's last chapters are the most interesting and detail the operational approach and execution of the 2,500 forces India rapidly deployed to Malé, Maldives. The operation itself was a tremendous organizational feat, planned and initiated in under sixteen hours, and one that announced India's pivot from defense to regional power projection and influence. What exigence driven, time constrained, rapid operational development and execution may encumber planners and strategists, may also impede writers equally. The text and format feel clunky and somewhat schizophrenic.

On the one hand, the book is produced like a glossy magazine, laced with period pictures and a section of drawings of the equipment and forces involved. On the other hand, the prose is dry and factual, more like a reference book. The story lacks the human element, pace, and tension that drive similar analyses of military campaigns. The book is challenging going and is not for the faint of heart. For instance, a significant portion of the book details the Indian military capabilities and is thick with abbreviations and alphanumeric indicators, creating an almost impenetrable text. The atomic level of detail is superfluous to the comprehension of events and impedes the overall flow and enjoyment of the book.

*Operation Cactus* is a mishmash of strategic assessment, enthusiasts' detail, and operational analysis. The different sections seem to have been written to appeal to different audiences, such as modelers,

Due to their desire for regional influence, the Indian government decided to intervene. The actions are written in matter of fact, chronological prose but the sheer comedy of errors on the part of the Tamil mercenaries makes the reading entertaining. Despite the comic sequence of events, the attempted coup was real, and the Indian military response was serious. Operation Cactus was the largest out-of-country deployment of forces India had attempted, and a watershed event for India. Badri-Maharaj suggests the operation cemented India's role as a reliable regional partner.

*Operation Cactus: Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988*, is not a must read but it is a very good read for military planners, especially those planning in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond the visage of entertainment, the monograph contains depth. The ideas Badri-Maharaj plants in the text allude to the pressures forces face as they transition from defensive to expeditionary. It offers ways to empathize with Indian and other developing forces and techniques to maximize partnerships. The interwoven history of the three countries provides important context for understanding the dynamics of the region that are beset with strategic competition and climate change challenges of vital national interest.

planners, and historians, but fail to come together as a coherent whole. The incoherence added to the frustration of wading through the book's overly detailed and abbreviation thick prose in the first half. Unfortunately, the second half did not rescue the book or yield a satisfying end. The analysis felt thin, and the fact the coup was effectively resolved before the Indian's landed suggested deliberate coyness on the part of the author.

*Operation Cactus: Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988* was a tough slog, lacked cohesion, and arguably tries to appeal to too broad an audience. The Indian achievements during Operation Cactus are worthy of note and celebration, but the book does the Indian forces a disservice. The glossy production was intended for mass appeal and may interest some patient logisticians, enthusiasts, or niche historians. Readers looking for a text that balances the analysis, narrative, and insight into the thinking and feeling of the forces, might be better served saving the space on their bookshelf for another.

#### **Book Information:**

*Operation Cactus: Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988*

By Sanjay Badri-Maharaj

Helion & Company, 2021. 66 pp.