

Pakistan's Nuclear Posturing and India's Nuclear Doctrine

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The clamour for a review/revision of India's nuclear doctrine was ostensibly laid to rest once Prime Minister Modi dismissed any need for it earlier this year. However, some voices continue to express anxiety over the inability of the Indian nuclear doctrine to deter Pakistan from mounting acts of terrorism against India. They feel that Pakistan's nuclear strategy has been smarter and that it has managed to take India for a ride. Questions that are repeatedly raised are: why should a country build a nuclear weapon at a high diplomatic and economic cost, and yet eschew its first use? Why should India be willing to suffer nuclear first use but not threaten to do so itself? Why should India stick to minimum deterrence even as Pakistan loudly proclaims full spectrum deterrence anchored in battlefield use of nuclear weapons at one end of the spectrum and strategic use of long range missiles at the other? In short, does Pakistan's nuclear posturing (with growing numbers of warheads, testing of the Nasr and nuclear capable cruise missiles, and overt brandishing of its nuclear capability) merit a change in India's doctrine?

In order to answer these questions, one must first understand the difference in the philosophies and roles of the nuclear weapons that India and Pakistan maintain. Pakistan uses its nuclear weapons to deter conventional warfare with a superior military capability of India, unlike India that uses its nuclear weapons only to deter the use of nuclear weapons of Pakistan. Hence, the

nuclear posturing of Pakistan is compelled to be more aggressive. After all, how can it hope to stop a conventional response to an act of terrorism unless it brandishes a near automatic escalation to the nuclear level? The assumption underlying this belief is that India would not want to get into a nuclear exchange, hence, would refrain from action at the conventional level itself. The threat of use of battlefield nuclear weapons is meant to further this philosophy of brinkmanship or projection of a very low threshold of tolerance of any use of force by India.

Should this posturing deter India from conventional action if it finds it necessary to punish Pakistan for an act of terrorism? Is the threat of first use, especially of 'tactical nuclear weapons' credible? Particularly when India professes a doctrine of assured retaliation to cause unacceptable damage? Is the Indian nuclear doctrine not credible? Or is Pakistan's posturing mere bluster? Let's answer these questions through an assessment of the two essential attributes of the Indian doctrine: credible minimum deterrence and No First Use (NFU).

Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)

The rejection of the concept of nuclear war-fighting frees India from the need to match the nuclear arsenal of its adversary/(ies) weapon for weapon. It was stated by Kenneth Waltz several decades ago, "Forces designed for war-fighting have to be compared with each other. Forces designed for war-detering need not be compared. The question is not whether one country has less than another, but whether it can do unacceptable damage to another...."¹ With the principal role of India's nuclear force being to protect the nation from nuclear blackmail and coercion, instead of any desire to annex or mount aggression, the country's policy-makers perceive the need for an arsenal just large enough to promise unacceptable damage.

While the determination of exact numbers could change with technological developments such as deployment of an effective Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) by an adversary, it definitely need not seek superiority or even parity with the adversary's nuclear forces. All that the arsenal should be able to ensure is *assured retaliation capability* that can inflict *unacceptable damage* on the enemy. Therefore, the minimum number of weapons necessary in the arsenal must have a correlation with the unacceptability threshold of the adversary. A study of the strategic culture, socio-psychological make-up, economic growth (the more developed the country, the less the loss it would be willing to take as a result of a nuclear exchange), and nature of the political system (the more

closed a system, the greater the loss it could take) can help make a considered judgment of what would be unacceptable to the adversary.

Fortunately, it is not very difficult to impose punishment with nuclear weapons. By their very nature, they impose huge damage on life and property that cannot be restricted in time and space. Moreover, given the high density of population in this region, punishing a first user with unacceptable damage neither calls for the kinds of numbers that the superpowers built, nor the kinds of yields that they experimented with. A sufficient number of kiloton weapons dispersed intelligently over the target and made to explode at an intelligent height to maximise damage suffices for credible deterrence. Therefore, instead of getting fixated on numbers, India needs to focus on ensuring the survivability of sufficient warheads, delivery vehicles and command and control mechanisms to convey the message that no use of the nuclear weapon would go unanswered.

India needs to focus on survivability of weapons systems.

Counter-Strike/No First Use (NFU)

In a situation where both sides have secure counter-strike capabilities, the first use of nuclear weapons, however splendid the first strike might be, cannot rule out the possibility of nuclear retaliation. An offensive nuclear strategy can neither assure victory, nor promise no nuclear damage to self. This military logic prompted India to accept no first use since even first use of nuclear weapons in a situation where nuclear retaliation is inevitable cannot protect a nation or even make its situation better even if it is losing the conventional game. It is also for this reason that Pakistan's first use strategy is not credible. If India's retaliation will result in the loss of the major cities of Pakistan then it would only worsen its situation with nuclear use, not redeem itself in any way.

In fact, the act of using nuclear weapons first is not as easy as it is believed to be since the first user has to take into account not just what would happen in the first phase of the war, but also on how it would proceed and end – scenarios which are not easy to coherently contemplate in the presence of robust retaliatory nuclear weapons. Hence, even countries with a first use strategy find it very difficult to actually execute it, and also politically limiting to do so. This is a thought worth considering since conventional wisdom has us believe that first use is more liberating compared to a counter-strike strategy. But serious thought to actual execution of first use reveals the complexities involved in doing so.

Firstly, from the *point of view of nuclear arsenal requirements*, first use postures based on projection of nuclear war-fighting require large arsenals of first strike weapons (such as accurate missiles with multiple independently retargetable vehicles), nuclear superiority to carry out attacks against an adversary's retaliatory forces, elaborate and delegated command and control structures to handle launch on warning or launch under attack postures to launch simultaneous nuclear attacks from, and over, dispersed forces. All these requirements also raise the risk of nuclear use due to an accident or a miscalculation in a moment of crisis.

Secondly, NFU is liberating from the *point of view of military command and control*. It allows the military to maintain a more relaxed posture rather than straining at the nuclear leash in a hair-trigger alert posture that can easily fall prey to misadventure. Neither does it have to perfect the logistics of first use which must involve coordinating a nuclear attack on a diversified arsenal with speed and surprise to hit the adversary's forces before they can be launched or dispersed. It involves addressing complicated questions such as whether to launch aircraft first or missiles, how many to launch in the first wave, etc. A credible first use requires forward deployment of nuclear forces and pre-delegation of authority to launch nuclear weapons and this can never be a risk-free option. Responsible command and control is not easy to enforce at each level given that in times of crisis, lack of information, misinformation and misjudgments could often become causes of confrontation without either side having the intention to precipitate one.

Moreover, from the point of view of alleviating the adversary's insecurity by relieving pressure on its leaders for launching a preemptive strike, NFU helps to mitigate the "use or lose" pressure and thereby lessens crisis instability that could cause inadvertent deterrence breakdown. If the adversary is constantly under fear of an imminent nuclear strike, his own temptation to use his nuclear force would be higher.

Finally, NFU *frees the political leadership from the psychological pressure* of taking the difficult decision of using a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). This is sure to weigh on him/her personally for the damage caused and for the international opprobrium for having breached a nuclear taboo. And to top it all, to do so in the knowledge that own vulnerability to retaliation can yet not be escaped. Therefore, rather than having the first use/strike option, it would be better to signal a disproportionate response and, thus, deter the adversary. Deterrence is, in fact, the only real defence against nuclear weapons.

In view of all of the above, the NFU appears far more sensible and credible. While a country would find it very difficult to use the weapon first, the decision of retaliation would be far easier, seemingly legitimate, and more guilt-free to make. In fact, by projecting assured retaliation, a nation displays greater confidence, and, hence, greater deterrence credibility. And, by establishing the nuclear weapon as an instrument of punishment through retaliation, the country lessens the possibility of deterrence breakdown, and, thus, minimises, if not prevents, the very use of nuclear weapons.

Indian nuclear doctrine is based on threat of prohibitive punishment.

Countering Pakistan's Nuclear Posturing

As is evident, India's nuclear doctrine is built on sound principles and best suited to avoid deterrence breakdown. It deters deliberate use of nuclear weapons through the promise of punishment. It prevents inadvertent use of nuclear weapons by adopting the strategy of no first use. Pakistan can continue to posture a low nuclear threshold, but it has no bearing on the country's nuclear arsenal, force posture or doctrine.

However, what can be improved to counter Pakistan is the process of communication of resolve through politico-military and diplomatic signaling. Indeed, for deterrence to be credible, the visibility of political will through an organisational set-up reflecting institutional decision-making is crucial. Rawalpindi believes that its nuclear weapons have obviated the possibility of a conventional Indo-Pak War. In making this assumption, Pakistan is not doubting India's capability, but its will to mount retaliation. This issue should be addressed through effective communication. Capability build-up is meaningless if the adversary does not know about it, misreads it, or if it doubts the resolve of the country to put it to use. It is critical, therefore, to convey a coherent and consistent message to the adversary so that he does not premise his nuclear strategy on mistaken assumptions.

Fortunately, communication of resolve can be displayed across a range of issues. In fact, the resolve does not have to be conveyed through conduct of a conventional or nuclear war. That would be foolish. But, its evidence on issues as varied as stringent law and order enforcement at home, firmness in policy-making and pursuit of inter-state relations, zero tolerance for terrorism, etc can effectively convey it. More specific to the nuclear domain could be actions such as providing information on the meeting of the Political Council

of the Nuclear Command Authority to consider India's threat environment or on conduct of military war games in which the use of nuclear weapons by the adversary is factored in and successfully handled. In such case then, the focus must be on enhancing the expression of resolve to indicate that India would not hesitate to consider a counter-strike that would result in disproportionate loss to the adversary. It would not climb the escalation ladder one step at a time. Just as Pakistan claims that there is a one rung escalation ladder that would take it up from India's conventional response to a nuclear riposte, India should communicate that it too has a one rung ladder that would take any nuclear use (in the battlefield or otherwise) to a nuclear retaliation that would result in substantial damage to the adversary.

For this message to carry weight, it is equally important that there is greater transparency of the military dimension of nuclear command and control too, including redundancies that assure automaticity of the nuclear response. Consequently, there is a requirement for strengthening the public profile of the Strategic Forces Command through a calibrated transparency on its role and mandate that can signal intent and purpose to the adversary.

Conclusion

India possesses nuclear weapons to safeguard itself against nuclear coercion or blackmail. Accordingly, its nuclear doctrine prescribes a political role for its nuclear weapons. It ascribes to NFU since it envisages no role for the weapon in staging aggression, but will only be usable in a situation where an adversary has first used such a weapon. In such a situation, the doctrine promises assured retaliation to cause unacceptable damage. In order to carry out this exercise, the doctrine aspires for a minimum number whose credibility resides in its survivability.

The operational nuclear strategy as flows from India's nuclear doctrine provides the least risk option in the presence of nuclear weapons. It premises nuclear deterrence on a small arsenal that is not on hair trigger alert, and, hence, less open to the possibilities of miscalculation or accidental use. At the same time, given its own orientation towards counter-strike to impose punishment, the strategy seeks to minimise the chances of nuclear use in the first place. The credibility of the deterrent strategy still requires some capabilities to be developed, but that is a work in progress. Given India's size in terms of its geographical expanse, material resources, economic strength, technological prowess and human resource potential, there are many factors that are in the

country's favour. Much has been accomplished in terms of operationalisation of the strategy in capability build up as well as in institutionalisation of the political and military command and control. Unfortunately, not enough has been disclosed. And this has led to a sense of lack of reassurance at home and assumption of lack of resolve to act across the borders. Therefore, this is the area that should be the focus of the government of the day.

Pakistan's nuclear, posturing bordering on brinksmanship, is a compulsion for the country since it seeks to deter through the threat and fear of escalation. This does not merit a change in India's nuclear doctrine which is premised on sound logic and clear understanding of the limited role that nuclear weapons can play in national security strategies. These are not weapons that can credibly be used for war-fighting and there is no reason to believe that Pakistan too takes their use lightly. It only projects such a posture. Of course, in doing, so it raises risks of inadvertent nuclear use and actually displays irresponsible behaviour. There is no reason for India to follow suit. The two basic attributes of the Indian nuclear doctrine explained in this paper reflect maturity, a desire for stability and a sense of responsibility, besides credibility of action. Many are yet to wake up to this wisdom.

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Notes

1. Kenneth Waltz as quoted by Gen Sundarji, *The Blind Men of Hindoostan* (1993), p. 68.