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# Between Ambiguity and Brinkmanship: A Study of Pakistan's Nuclear Policy

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Analysing the South Asian security scene in the post-Cold War era involves the overt back to back nuclearisation by India and Pakistan in 1998 and the changing perceptions of national security as reflected in the policy formulations of both countries on nuclear strategy. For Pakistan, comprehensive deliberations on the security problematique are addressed within the gambit of its newly acquired nuclear weapons and in the shaping of its nuclear doctrine.

Whether to take a risk—a taste for it, or an aversion to it—is a meaningful way to explain decision-making since it links the strategic and psychological conceptions of choice.<sup>1</sup> It portrays leaders as calculating goal-seekers while allowing them to have different personal decision-making styles. One can call Khrushchev risk-acceptant or risk-seeking and Brezhnev risk-averse without implying that either one was more rational than the other. In the same vein, one can argue that the governing elite of Pakistan are risk takers perhaps to the point of brinkmanship.

The idea is that a risk-averse state is one that chooses policies that reduce others' incentives to attack it. Under extreme provocation and in an asymmetrical strategic environment vis-à-vis India, Pakistan's ruling elite, may adopt a policy of preemption as it may determine that it (Pakistan) has nothing more to lose by not going in for the first use of nuclear weapons. In the context of South Asia, Pakistan's nuclear doctrine relies in part on deterrence by denial and deterrence by

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punishment. What makes Pakistan's strategic policy a bit ambiguous is that neither of these concepts has been articulated or explored fully to its operational limits vis-à-vis India's nuclear strategy.

### **India's Nuclear Doctrine: Contrast with Pakistan**

The following are some of the highlights of India's and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines, on a comparative note.<sup>2</sup>

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- India's strategic perspective for its nuclear doctrine encompasses a wider latitude than South Asia in keeping with its strategic potential. Pakistan's perspective, as presently evident, seems to be India-specific.
- India proclaims "no-first-use" as a matter of principle. Pakistan is averse to it and disinclined to give any such guarantees, feeling that a bland "no-first use" policy invalidates its deterrence advantage against India.
- India's nuclear weapon system will be a "triad" (land-based ballistic missiles, sea-based assets and airborne platforms). Pakistan's current capacity in this regard is limited to land-based and aircraft delivery systems.
- India's and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines emphasise a "credible minimum deterrent." However, Pakistan's capabilities in this direction may be questionable.
- India has revised its nuclear doctrine in 2003 by including that any chemical, biological and nuclear attack on its territory is to be responded to through massive nuclear retaliation. Pakistan has not made any such formulation so far.
- India's nuclear arsenal will be under civil political control at all times. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal will be under the de-facto control of the army chief.
- India will not resort to use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or those not aligned with nuclear weapon powers. Pakistan has not made any such explicit pledge in its nuclear policy.
- The 'Kargil' (1999) and 'Operation Parakram' (2001-02) crises demonstrated that mutually assured destruction deterrence is operating in South Asia, and that both sides have fairly recessed red lines for launching a nuclear strike on the other. But it remains unclear how much of their restraint is not a fallout of direct deterrence, rather a lack of political will or external intervention.

- Pakistan seems to be eager to engage in dangerous brinkmanship and India is less inclined to embark upon this gamble as it considers itself a status quoist power.
- As for Pakistan, the incentives to persist with unconventional and low intensity conflict in the form of state-supported terrorism, state-supported insurgency and cross-border terrorism are likely to continue at the lower end of the conflict spectrum as large scale conventional wars vis-à-vis India remain risky. This may result in conventional deterrence stability in the Indian subcontinent even though the stability might be construed as 'ugly' and less than perfect peace.

## **Pakistan's Nuclear Command**

Pakistan opted for nuclear weaponisation in the summer of 1998 and established the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) in February 2000 with three components: Employment Control Committee, Development Control Committee and Strategic Plans Division. Pakistan also set up a nuclear regulatory authority to bring in proper coordination in its nuclear programme. The NCA is responsible for policy formulation, employment and development control over all strategic nuclear forces and strategic organisations. Besides the president, the NCA includes the ministers of foreign affairs, defence and interior, the chiefs of all the military Services and the heads of strategic organisations.<sup>3</sup>

### *Pakistan's Thinking on No First Use (NFU)*

Pakistan has, thus, far shown little interest in the idea of NFU. Perhaps the closest Pakistan officially came to accepting the language of no first use was in the summer of 2002 when India and Pakistan confronted each other in the wake of the Kaluchak massacre in Jammu and Kashmir. In response to India's threats to retaliate conventionally to the massacre, Pakistan stated that it would respond forcefully, in turn, hinting that it was prepared to use nuclear weapons as a first choice. Shortly thereafter, Islamabad publicly clarified, apparently under US pressure, that responding to an Indian attack did not mean nuclear use, presumably first use, against India. Among non-officials in Pakistan, those who oppose weaponisation as well as those who support a minimum deterrent would probably support NFU, the former as an interim confidence-building measure in the transition to nuclear disarmament and the latter in order to keep the nuclear arsenal minimal and to signal moderation and restraint.<sup>4</sup> The Pakistani scepticism or opposition to NFU seems to arise from the following concerns. In

contrast to India, Pakistan's thinking on a no first use/first use policy is almost completely military-strategic and country specific (India). The first use of nuclear weapons is intrinsic to Pakistan's exploitation of the asymmetrical conventional situation in South Asia. Protected under the umbrella of nuclear weapons, Pakistan is free to choose sub-conventional conflict with India.

### *First Strike Option*

In order to maintain 'strategic balance', Pakistan, taking note of India's overwhelming superiority in conventional arms and manpower, may be tempted to go in for rapid escalation with a first strike option. Pakistan is very likely to exercise this option to counter India, should the latter pose a serious and credible threat to Pakistan's

territorial integrity, leading to its dismemberment and further fragmentation.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, while proclaiming to be in full control of his nation's strategic assets, did not hesitate to threaten India that it would use nuclear weapons in the event of the latter violating the "Line of Control or the international border."<sup>6</sup> Nuclear weapons are aimed solely at India. In case, deterrence fails, they will be used, if:<sup>7</sup>

- India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory(space threshold);
- India destroys a large part either of its land or air forces(military threshold);
- India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan(economic threshold); and
- India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates large internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilisation).

Pakistan, however, is acutely aware of the profound asymmetry in the military balance in South Asia. Pakistan resorting to a limited war with salami slicing tactics has the potential of backfiring. In the words of Gen Jehangir Karamat, a former chief of the army of Pakistan, "Pakistan accepts the imbalance inherent in the equation with India and will not seek to match capabilities. Pakistan, will, therefore, modernise and upgrade its military power in carefully selected areas

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so that its deterrent and defence capability are not degraded and it never faces a scenario of overwhelming strategic superiority from India. This deterrence is the best guarantee of stability because an unacceptable imbalance can have serious implications.”<sup>8</sup> According to Zafar Iqbal Cheema, Pakistan’s deterrence can be further augmented by its decision to rapidly assemble a small nuclear force, to diversify weapons by using designs that rely on both uranium and plutonium, to develop wide ranging missile programmes, and to take steps to miniaturise nuclear warheads.<sup>9</sup> To supplement this line of thinking, Zafar Nawaz Jaspal emphasises more on capability and less on the number of warheads. According to him, “In the present strategic scenario, Pakistan possesses enough strategic weaponry.... to provide it with a minimum nuclear deterrence. The basis of this perception is that in nuclear deterrence, parity between opponents is not based on numerical equality of the number of nuclear delivery systems, or of the number of warheads or in the yield of megatons available to each opponent. Parity requires assured destruction capability.”<sup>10</sup> According to Stephen P Cohen, the Pakistan Army has conceived of an escalation ladder.<sup>11</sup> Four of these possible scenarios involve the threat of first use or actual first use:

- Private and public warnings to India not to move its forces threateningly
- A demonstration explosion on Pakistani territory to deter India from a conventional attack
- The use of a “few” nuclear weapons on Pakistani territory against intruding Indian forces
- Nuclear strikes against “critical” Indian military targets, preferably in areas with low population and without much by way of infrastructure.

Of these four, according to Cohen, the first two could well avoid Indian retaliation altogether since they would be carried out inside Pakistan and would not target Indian assets. The second two, Pakistani planners might calculate, would be more provocative but might still not cause India to unleash a full scale retaliatory strike. In this context, Shireen Mazari argues that “the first generation of nuclear weapons that Pakistan would deploy would have large CEP (circular error probability), that is, would not be too accurate, therefore, at least initially Pakistan would have to evolve a counter-value strategy: that is, targeting, Indian economic, leadership and population centres rather than hardened military targets.”<sup>12</sup>

Mirza Aslam Beg, on the issue of Pakistan’s nuclear option, says, “The strategy of deterrence through flexible response is applicable, based on a

minimum number of weapons. What comprises minimal nuclear deterrence is a national issue, a function of the political and military judgment, related to the adversary's capability."<sup>13</sup> On the assured nature of Pakistan's nuclear capability, there are two divergent views. Lt Gen Asad Durrani states, "Neither of us relishes the prospect of ever using them, especially when the other side could match the response. India could consider taking out our nuclear arsenal, to deny us its use—in practice, it is an extremely risky proposition. Even on odd weapon that survived the so-called 'first strike', could cause irreparable damage."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Ayesha Siddiqa-Agha argues that "the idea is to ensure that in case of hostilities, Islamabad can manage to deliver two to three nuclear weapons to the adversary's territory. For the time being, this would be achieved with land-based missiles."<sup>15</sup> In the same vein, Ejaz Haidar considers "Pakistan is in a better position to challenge India through low intensity conflict. This means that India could now be denied the luxury of expanding the conflict and capitalising on the conventional symmetries."<sup>16</sup>

### **Viability of Limited War**

Some analysts have raised the spectre of limited war in terms of its objectives within a strategic space-using calibrated use of force, i.e., between initiating an armed conflict and an all-out war. It may be limited from the perspectives of the initiator of the conflict, though this may not necessarily be the case with the defender. In this context, it is worth noting analyst Bharat Karnad's "Sialkot Grab" published in the inaugural issue of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), *Army 2020*. Karnad visualises "India cutting off a thirty-mile-deep swathe of territory all along the border, threatening Pakistan's centre of gravity located in the urban centres at around that depth." His assessment is that this would not entail a nuclear war since it would not threaten Pakistan's survival. Since Indian mechanised forces would be within fallout distance of urban concentrations and Pakistani forces, Pakistan would also be deprived of nuclear targets. Indian deterrence would preclude city busting as an option.

Karnad's thesis is that success in a nuclear confrontation is predicated on confronting the adversary with impossibly tough choices he cannot risk taking. There are practical problems with the "Sialkot Grab" scheme of fighting a limited war. The area encompassed in the thirty-mile-deep stretch would be quite impractical like the US finds areas outside its 'green zones' in Iraq. Since it is densely populated, it could lead to several Fallujas. Collateral damage resulting from a conventional war would also be considerable, thereby providing the

rationale for Pakistan to up the ante. Contrary to Karnad's thinking, the Indian flirtation with Pakistan's self-defined nuclear threshold is likely to push the conflict up on the escalatory ladder.<sup>17</sup>

**Issue of Nuclear Command and Control and Hotline:** On the crucial issue of nuclear command and control in Pakistan's nuclear establishment, the key issue is: who actually is in charge? According to Lt Gen Sardar FS Lodi (Retd), "It must be kept in mind that the nuclear option would be a weapon of last resort which may eventually produce no winners or losers and must, therefore, be employed with the greatest of care and caution after discussing all the pros and cons of the situation, its impact in the region and beyond and its international ramifications."<sup>18</sup> According to Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of Physics at the Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan, "Should a nuclear war occur, it may well be that the order is not given by the Chief Executive or the Prime Minister or whoever. That decision may be taken by a Brigadier, who will decide whether you and I live or die..."<sup>19</sup>

### **Possibility of Diversion of Fissile Materials**

Like in any nuclear weapon state, there are multiple vulnerabilities in the nuclear weapons complex in Pakistan too.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Pakistan, it is possible that groups or individuals may violate security rules for a variety of reasons, including profit making, settling a vendetta, or for religious or ideological motives. Rogue elements may try to gain control over sensitive items for their own use or to transfer these items to another state or to other non-state actors for financial or ideological reasons. A special concern is that Pakistan, as its history suggests, may suffer another military coup at some point of time. A new leadership, in that case, can be expected to place a high priority on seizing the country's nuclear assets.

If Pakistan suffers extreme instability or civil war, additional threats to its strategic nuclear assets are also possible. This may happen, as Muthiah Allagappa comments, due to the military's inherent struggle to attain legitimacy and in the "military's inability to construct an acceptable political framework for the management of the state, including the acquisition and exercise of state power"<sup>21</sup> and in facilitating the emergence of a viable civil society:

- **Loss of Central Control of Storage Facilities:** Clear lines of the communication code and control over weapons, weapons components, and fissile material may be broken or lost entirely.
- **Coup:** In the most extreme case, a coup takes place and the new regime attempts to gain control of the entire nuclear complex. *A New York Times*

report suggested US policy-makers envisioning alternatives for Pakistan after Musharraf. Under this scenario, the Vice-Chief of the Army, Ahsan Saleem Hayat, takes over from Gen Musharraf as head of the military and former banker Mohammed Mian Soomro is installed as president, with Gen Hayat wielding most of the power.<sup>22</sup> In this context, Sydney J Freedberg writes, “He is just the latest leader to stand precariously atop Pakistan’s three ever-shifting tectonic plates—generals, politicians and mullahs. Sooner, not later, he will lose his footing. To understand what might happen next, it’s important to understand the three major power centres at work in Pakistan.”<sup>23</sup> It is also possible that foreign government(s) may intervene to prevent a hostile entity from seizing the strategic nuclear assets.

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In the post-bin Laden scene, when Al Qaeda has vowed to take revenge, and in view of the fragility of President Asif Ali Zardari’s regime, Pakistan must also increasingly worry that experts from the nuclear complex could steal sensitive information or assist the nuclear weapon programmes of other countries or terrorist groups. The information could include highly classified nuclear weapons data, exact storage locations of weapons or fissile material, access control arrangements, or other sensitive, operational details about these weapons.

**Issue of Disaster Management:** There is no reference in Pakistan’s nuclear doctrine as to the appropriate disaster control system either from a nuclear first strike, a retaliatory strike by the adversary, or a potential accident. In a chilling report published by the Britain based *New Scientist*s, in 2002, it was reported that a massive loss of men and materials would occur should a nuclear exchange take place between India and Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, India’s Home Ministry is currently raising several battalions to tackle natural disasters and combat nuclear, biological and chemical warfare. In all likelihood, Pakistan is expected to follow India’s path in having National Emergency Response Force battalions to be deployed in strategic locations under the supervision of the director-general of civil defence should such consequence management contingencies arise.

## **Pakistan's Current Missile Capability and India's Cold Start Strategy**

According to *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Pakistan has nearly completed development of a solid fuel missile that could strike key Indian cities from deep within Pakistani territory through the Ghauri-series of liquid propelled missiles in an offensive operation and the Shaheen-series weapons as defensive measures. On May 24, 2002 (and very recently on April 19, 2011), Pakistan also tested the intermediate range ballistic missile Hatf V (Ghauri) missiles that has a range of 1,500 km (1,000 miles) that can hit most populous cities of northern, central and western India. The father of the Pakistani bomb, Dr. AQ Khan, in a declaration has asserted that Ghauri missiles could "wipe out thrice, all the big cities of India."<sup>25</sup> On June 4, 2004, Pakistan successfully test-fired the Hatf-V and Ghauri-1 missiles. In addition, Pakistan is now equipped with ballistic missiles like the Abdali-1, Hatf-I, Ghaznavi short range ballistic missile, Shaheen series of MRBMs (medium range ballistic missiles) (750-2,500 km) and Ghauri series of MRBMs and IRBMs (intermediate range ballistic missiles) ranging between 1,300 to 3,500 km. India, on the other hand, on June 13, 2004, has successfully test-fired the BrahMos, the supersonic cruise missile that can travel at Mach 2.823 and which has been configured to be launched from either land, ship, submarine or aircraft, using liquid ramjet technology.

Furthermore, on April 12, 2007, India successfully test fired the Agni-III longest-range missile, which can hit objects from a range of 3,000 miles and, thus, the entire territorial space of Pakistan (in addition, China's mega metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai) can be within India's missile range. The Agni-III's successful test is likely to put additional pressure on Pakistan's nuclear establishment as the former can claim to have attained minimum credible deterrence and which can form a crucial component of India's nuclear doctrine. The Agni-IV, with a range of 3,500-km was tested on November 15, 2011. In the coming years, India is also opting for nuclear armed submarines, armed with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, for assured and effective second-strike capabilities and nuclear-tipped land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) to provide India a definitive strategic edge. In addition, India's armed forces have formulated a joint war doctrine to ensure that the individual combat capabilities of the army, navy and air force can come together in the event of a war. It remains to be seen whether and when Pakistan will match India's cruise missile and related capabilities so as to deprive its rival of a strategic edge.

Similarly, India's new Cold Start strategy that became operational with the major military exercise, Vajra Shakti in May 2005 has been of real concern

to Pakistan's nuclear establishment. Under the Cold Start strategy, India could retaliate with nuclear weapons if its armed forces were subjected to nuclear, chemical or biological strikes, and this could have a profound strategic impact on Pakistan's nuclear doctrine. Although the Cold Start strategy was in place under the North Atlantic alliance, a similar replication in the South Asian context might have serious implications, thus, further endangering the strategic environment of the region.

### Conclusion

In the shadow of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine lies the perennial issue of Kashmir which has been the bone of contention between India and Pakistan since 1947. Since volatility over Kashmir may yet provide a flashpoint, that possibility may induce both countries to come to the negotiating table and to opt for nuclear deterrence and quick implementation of 'enforceable and verifiable' confidence building measures. The statement made by Pervez Musharraf on December 18, 2003, to be flexible on the Kashmir issue and be ready to bend on his UN Kashmir baggage by keeping aside the UN Security Council Resolution was a welcome sign and could have been explored further.

India's ex-Foreign Minister K Natwar Singh's proposal to evolve and study the feasibility of a common nuclear doctrine among India, Pakistan and China in order to bring peace and stability to the region, could be explored further. The concept of nuclear deterrence for the two South Asian rival countries with deep-rooted historical animosities and regional ambitions might be an uphill task unlike the case of the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War years when both the countries stayed broadly within the perimeter of deterrence. With the nuclear doctrines of Pakistan and India in place, it was hoped a peace constituency could hopefully take firm hold in South Asia, ensuring that the proactive peace process currently underway between India and Pakistan was irreversible.

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## Notes

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