

India's Response Options to Pakistani Nuclear First Use

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The promise of 'massive' nuclear retaliation may prove inadequate in staying Pakistani nuclear hand in face of Indian offensives. Inflicting 'unacceptable damage' may appear disproportionate to its leadership if in response to lower order nuclear first use. Therefore, nuclear retaliation could well be of quid pro quo or quid pro quo plus levels with damage not amounting to an 'unacceptable' order.

In the event, India's conflict strategy for its western borders would unfold as per options selected. One among other options is possibly in accord with the much written about Cold Start doctrine. Nevertheless, the conflict strategy can be expected to be offensive, taking advantage of the changed mindset and organisations enabling this over the past decade. The services are conscious that these operations would be under the nuclear overhang. No doubt this would find reflection in the manner political aims are translated into strategic and in turn operational objectives. Reflection in the early part of last decade on Limited War doctrine indicates that proverbial nuclear thresholds would be respected.

In effect Pakistan's nuclear deterrent would have worked but only partially. Its leveraging of the nuclear deterrent to deter conventional war would have failed. But, the nuclear backdrop would help preserve it from any expansive Indian war aims. Since, as Peter Lavoy informs, Pakistan would largely rely on conventional forces to counter Indian offensives, the nuclear card would have political utility. Brandishing the same for nuclear signalling so as to bring war termination pressures from the international community can be expected. This may be in the form of rhetoric, nuclear tests or a demonstration strike.

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A hypothetical case of highly provocative nuclear first use with the purpose of nuclear signalling for

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war termination is defensive use on own territory against insignificant tactical targets. A favoured example in strategic literature is a solitary nuclear strike on an advancing column in the desert. It has been estimated that such a strike would cause just a few Indian casualties. Such a strike would be twin edged for Pakistan. One is that it would breach the professed Indian nuclear threshold of 'any Indian casualties any where' resulting in 'assured retaliation' of proportions exacting 'unacceptable damage'. The second, in Pakistan's favour as intended, is in focussing international attention on to restricting the manner of Indian reaction.

India's nuclear deterrent doctrine is explicit that the counter would be 'massive'. Since this is for deterrence, in case of deterrence breakdown, response strategy could well be different. 'Unacceptable damage' can be caused by less than 'massive' levels of nuclear retaliation. In the event, the political leadership would have its nuclear decision making informed by doctrine, but not restricted by it. In effect, nuclear employment doctrine may be different from nuclear deterrent doctrine. The latter is known, while the former is not known.

India's conventional offensives are likely to exploit the existing space between sub-conventional and perceived nuclear thresholds. While Pakistan can be expected to self-servingly project these thresholds as 'low', a realistic appreciation may indicate that enough space exists for measured force application. This being within the capability of Pakistani conventional counter action, risk of war escalation is minimised. Nevertheless, contingency planning being the measure of a professional military, India's counter options to Pakistani nuclear first use can be expected. This commentary makes some suggestions in this direction.

Firstly, in the pre-conflict stage, India needs to make its military doctrine transparent. It needs to indicate a pronounced inclination towards the Limited War concept. This has not been explicitly spelt out thus far in the Army doctrine in the open domain. The Navy doctrine (Indian Maritime Doctrine, p. 19) is somewhat hazy. It takes General or Total War as 'involving nearly all resources of the nation, with few, if any, restriction on the use of force, short of nuclear strike/retaliation (*italics added*).' Two problems arise. One is that this formulation appears to suggest that Total War aiming for 'annihilation or total subjugation of the opponent' can yet occur below the nuclear threshold.

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Second, there is no category in the 'Spectrum of Conflict' in the doctrine in which it accommodates nuclear use, since the definition of Total War recounted here seems to place it outside into some separate, undefined, category. The issue that arises is that minimalist resort to nuclear weapons such as in the example given does not automatically place the war into the Total War domain since 'annihilation' is not being sought. The overall impression is that the military is undecided to weigh in on the side of Limited War unambiguously. It needs to do so in order to raise the nuclear threshold.

Maintaining the threshold at a high level during conflict so as to gain military objectives without flirting with it requires explicitly conveying to Pakistan at the outset of the conflict through multiple channels that war aims do not seek regime change or state extinction. This would require not only information operations but also be conveyed by the threat perception in Pakistan stemming from its reading of troop deployment and dispositions. There is a paradox that requires to be lived with here. Operational transparency to indicate limited war aims is to the detriment of the heightened threat that serves to deter conventional conflict escalation. In case the enemy gets to know that limited aims are to be achieved, he can throw in much more than he otherwise would to deny these. But the problem of withholding from transparency is that in case the enemy is not able

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to match professions of limited war with actions on the ground, he may be inclined to a 'worst case' judgment. This builds in avoidable dynamism in lowering the nuclear threshold.

In the hypothetical case of lower order nuclear first use, the first consideration for retaliation is consequences for political aims of the conflict. The original limited political aim is threatened with expansion since nuclear weapons have been introduced into the conflict changing its nature and dimensions. In which case can original limited war aims be sustained? If not, is revision necessary? Such thinking needs be done prior. That an expanded nuclear war needs to be avoided is self-

evident. This can at best be in order to degrade a continuing nuclear threat under the logic of 'limiting damage' (Hermann Kahn) that may be sustained in further nuclear exchanges. The logic informing 'massive' nuclear retaliation seems to be precisely this. Taking out enemy nuclear capability along with punishing it would preserve oneself from his counter strikes. Nevertheless, this

is ruled out by the second strike capability available with Pakistan in terms of an expanded arsenal.

Since both sides share a common interest in limiting damage, continuation of the nuclear threat would be dependent on the counter. Therefore, the considerations on the nature of the counter would need to factor in the implications of escalation. It being undesirable, retaliation would be designed not so much to punish but also to enable exchange termination. Doing so at the lowest levels of nuclear retaliation would place the onus of escalation on the enemy. Since the exchange can get out of hand and result in spasmodic retaliation, in-conflict deterrence based on Schelling's concept of 'threat that leaves something to chance' is heightened. Such deterrence also exists to deter first use, but it is now more consequential since a nuclear war is an entirely new environment and would serve to focus minds more acutely on the threatening possibilities.

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What then are limiting options?

Firstly, the mistaken impression that Indian resolve may be weak, needs to be dispelled in Pakistani thinking. The propensity towards this may be more in Pakistan corresponding to the levels of ideological penetration by extremism of the Establishment and the military mind there. The Army can generally be reckoned as a rational organisation and its nuclear decision making system more so. Transparency has been resorted to over the last decade by Pakistan to influence perceptions that its nuclear capability lacks safety and control. It has taken steps in streamlining systems and these contribute to rational decision making. Irrationality projected is for deterrence purposes. This circumstance lends itself to Indian planning for conventional war, albeit a limited one. However, in case a mistaken impression on Indian resolve were to inform Pakistani thinking then, the propensity to lower the nuclear threshold would be greater. Therefore, either tests or better still a demonstration strike may both reinforce Indian resolve and impress Pakistani decision makers of its credibility. The action would require prior communication to Pakistan in order that it is not mistaken for a nuclear strike. Unstated possibilities this evokes would bring the international community to bear down on events compelling Pakistan to concede India's reasonable self-evidently demands without further affray.¹

Secondly, as discussed, nuclear first use by Pakistan may be with the political aim of conflict termination through influencing both Indian minds and the international community. Despite this intent and the low provocation levels of such a strike, this would place Pakistan inevitably and irreversibly on the political defensive. Nuclear resort may be sustainable in international law in

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the extreme case of threat to existence of the state. This would patently not be the case in light of broadcast limited war aims of India and the progress of the war. Therefore, India could profit politically from a measured response including a non-nuclear one. Such responses could be more violent conventional strikes against value targets of Pakistan that were originally kept off the scope of the war due to the intent of limitation. These could include political and military leadership, symbolic targets such as politically significant structures, expanded infrastructure degradation and heightened attrition on conventional forces. The nuclear threshold having already been crossed, restrictions would no longer apply. Therefore, keeping going conventionally would enable greater attrition on the Pakistani state and its military. This

would have political dividend post war in that the military not only would be blamed for provoking the punishment but would be too weak to regain its political salience in internal politics. Indian restraint in contrast to military adventurism in Pakistan would heighten calls for accountability, both internally in Pakistan and externally in a war crimes court. Therefore, a better peace post-conflict is possible through negotiations with a civilian regime. The point is that a non-nuclear counter deserves to be considered. Continuing restraint has advantages that current calls for scaling down Indian restraint and prudence seem to neglect.

The counter argument would be that restraint at this stage of a war gone nuclear may give the impression of pusillanimity to the enemy and embolden further, possibly more provocative, strikes. This is based on the logic that deterrence requires capability, resolve and communication of possession of both to the enemy. While capability exists, resolve may require communication. This can only be through striking back, deterring him from further strikes and limiting damage thereby. It would be useful for in-conflict deterrence, broadcasting unambiguously worse to come in case of continuation of the exchange by Pakistan. Internally political pressures would only be satisfied by nuclear punishment for Pakistan's temerity.

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The sustainability of the argument can best be seen in light of the changed conflict environment; one that has transited speedily from a limited war to a nuclear one, but has not acquired Total War portents. What would be the mental condition of decision makers in a nuclear war

scenario? Would they be amenable to being deterred as this logic indicates or would they be emotionally so charged as to be incapable of the self-restraint on which deterrence is predicated? Here, an answer is not attempted, but it is suggested that any risk of the latter is enough to bring the non-nuclear response route back into the reckoning, particularly in case of militarily inconsequential, non-provocative lower order nuclear use by Pakistan.

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Notes:

- 1 Ali Ahmed, 'Demonstration strikes, in an Indo-Pak conflict scenario', *CLAWS* website, http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=500&u_id=94