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# Escalation Control and the Case of Pakistan's TNWs for Battlefield Use: Futility of Thinking and Judgement

Balraj Nagal

*Escalation control and the nuclear option, is a subject matter, proven to be remarkably resistant to sensible analysis.*

— Michael Krepon

In October 2015, the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan justified the development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) by the country [suggesting, the Army], which interestingly is the mandate normally taken by the Strategic Plans Division (SPD) or the political establishment.<sup>1</sup> The former Director General of the SPD and then Adviser to the National Command Authority (NCA) had similarly stated the purpose of TNWs while speaking at an international seminar in March 2015. The standard statement by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) stated that Pakistan seeks deterrence across the entire spectrum of conflict, i.e. at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. The statements by various political and military leaders on the potential use of nuclear weapons against India, either direct, or couched, have been part of Pakistan's narrative for nearly two decades. And palpably, these developments,

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in the same vein, are aimed at projecting India as a war-mongering nation which is out to destroy Pakistan, and in doing so, is rendering South Asia an unstable region and, thus, causing alarm globally. Academic and defence analysts from Pakistan<sup>2</sup> and some other countries<sup>3</sup> hold responsible, or attribute, the TNWs, primarily to India's "Cold Start Doctrine", thereby implying that this is the only rationale for the development of Pakistan's TNWs.

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This leads to the fundamental summation, that of Pakistan believing that it can, in effect, deter India and, if required, control nuclear exchanges after the TNWs have been detonated in the battlefield. Another flawed presumption is that Pakistan can continue its "proxy war laced in the terror policy" against India after threatening India's conventional military advances with retaliation with TNWs, forcing New Delhi to not react in order to preserve its sovereignty. Before delving into the subject of nuclear escalation control, it is critical to highlight that the Pakistan Army, despite grave consequences, including that of destruction of the country will employ TNWs to protect/ bolster its image. The assessment is derived from historical records and the psyche of the Pakistan Army, which ultimately will determine the use of these weapons rather than the political leadership of Pakistan.

The four wars that Pakistan has waged against India in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999 coupled with, in the last seven decades, the ignoble proxy war of terror in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) unleashed by Pakistan since 1989, underscore the contortion of using terrorism as a tool of statecraft, based on their experience in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Pakistan's continuous denial, in spite of incontrovertible proof, leaves no room for trust that Pakistan will, in fact, not create, and give shape to, the next crisis in consonance

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with this revisionist agenda.<sup>5</sup> Based on the past experience, there is little doubt that the Pakistan Army will protect its agenda and not national interest, which was the basis of the creation of Bangladesh. The important lessons of history and war have not been learnt by Pakistan's military hierarchy, whilst they surely can be given the dubious

credit of aiming higher than their abilities. That said, pragmatism and caution have not been the virtues of the Pakistan Army, and, hence, it is important that the international community understand the psyche and mental make-up of the Pakistan Army, and take action to eliminate the Damocles sword that hangs over the world, at the opportune moment. As far as India is concerned, it must cater for the worst possible contingencies, now that Pakistan claims at possessing a full range of nuclear weapons.

### **NATO, Warsaw and TNWs**

While the world, prudently so, has decided to remove TNWs, Pakistan is taking the opposite path, probably trying to compare itself with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), where conventional imbalance was sought to be compensated for by TNWs. However, a deep understanding of the lessons of the Cold War are important for evaluating if the policy is one of similar value and context for application. Nuclear escalation control in the NATO-Warsaw Pact equation was never established, with declassified papers having confirmed the doubts. The scale of TNWs between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was massive with each side's arsenal running into thousands,<sup>6</sup> the frontage below 1,000 kilometres and conventional forces in far larger numbers and equipment compared to any other region even today.

The first major lesson learnt was that TNWs did not enhance deterrence, and on the contrary, the spiralling numbers created greater

danger and fear.<sup>7</sup> If TNWs were capable of creating deterrence, then the scale of strategic weapons and their delivery systems would have reduced to cater only for strategic equations at the international level. The ideological contest in other parts of the world created its own dynamics: being fought conventionally, backed by strategic deterrents, and so no need was felt to deploy TNWs in these regions.

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The solution to every conventional threat was not based on TNWs. The second important lesson learnt was that deployment of TNWs provided the choice, or option, of preemption to the attacker.<sup>8</sup> All TNWs need to deploy within limited distances from the tactical battle areas. The attacker will generally choose to remove the maximum number of firepower capability, with the TNWs representing the highest denominator in destructive systems. The means employed could include direct fire, air attacks, Special Forces, missile attacks, and a host of unstated methods. The third lesson was that there was no understanding on how escalation control would apply or work to limit the exchanges to the battlefield.<sup>9</sup> The *fait accompli* would result in a strategic exchange, thus, proving that TNWs do not solve the conventional predicament or dilemma. The fourth aspect pertained to the authority of release for the operational use<sup>10</sup> of TNWs, and the tactical commanders seeking very early release of TNWs, whereas prudence and the higher leadership would demand introduction of nuclear weapons as late as possible. This contrarian requirement was never satisfactorily decided. The fifth lesson was against mobile forces on which TNWs would have limited effect, namely, the mechanised forces which were designed to fight in a Nuclear, Biological, Chemical (NBC) environment.<sup>11</sup> The sixth factor was the security of TNW units, once deployed in operational areas, and the security, signature and timing of

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the movement would be critical giveaways, thus, allowing their targeting.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the extrication and redeployment of TNW units during crucial phases of the operations shall pose difficulties. Lastly, it was never conclusively established in any doctrine, or strategy evaluation, that TNWs would be decisive in war and, hence, their value continues to remain doubtful.<sup>13</sup>

### **India, Pakistan and TNWs**

Pakistan, following the 1998 nuclear tests, has not released any nuclear doctrine, strategy/policy, but made many provocative statements implying early use of nuclear weapons in a war with India, using/threatening to use nuclear weapons as a tool of blackmail/coercion under certain conditions. Pakistan has justified its nuclear arsenal based on threats from India in spite of evidence that every war has been initiated by Islamabad. It is well established that Pakistan has a nuclear policy of ‘first use’, nuclear war-fighting, offensive deterrence linking conventional conflict with nuclear escalation, brinkmanship with calibrated instability of nuclear deterrence. The nuclear thresholds are embedded in ambiguity on the scale of use, simultaneously demonstrating moral authority to use nuclear weapons against a hegemonistic power. The statements made after the initial tests of the short-range NASR missile, beginning 2011, had reiterated the India-centric approach of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and reasoned the requirement of TNWs to negate India’s ‘offensive approach’ to military actions against Pakistan.

Pakistan believes that at some point in the conflict spectrum, it will have to confront the Indian armed forces on Pakistani soil and will need TNWs to block the offensive and thereafter “control the escalation”. Escalation control in a nuclear environment has been analysed by many

security experts and academics in the past during the Cold War, wherein some beliefs and problems came to the fore. And after India and Pakistan declared their nuclear weapons operational, the subject of nuclear escalation control was again debated and certain barriers, constraints, and problems were drawn. These assumptions/deductions have been analysed in the subsequent section of this paper in the India-Pakistan context with Pakistan, ostensibly, having developed and deployed TNWs for battlefield use.

There are barriers (positives controls) to escalation, i.e., pre-crisis intervention or good political acumen, observing the spirit of international law, when associated losses outweigh the anticipated gains, and the results of escalation are less appealing than the status quo. Agreement in all these factors from Pakistan appears not forthcoming. In the future, it may accept pre-crisis intervention when it finds itself cornered due to any internal crisis.<sup>14</sup> There are certain beliefs that favour escalation control, if both adversaries agree to work within these formulations, as has been analysed in the following section.

### **Impediments to Escalation Control in South Asia**

The first belief is that escalation can be based on “mutual agreement between rivals to fight for limited stakes”.<sup>15</sup> This premise between India-Pakistan is a non-starter because the two sides have not even arrived at minimal nuclear confidence-building measures whereas limited stakes can only occur when there is agreement on respect for each other's survival. Pakistan, being a revisionist state, will always be averse to the idea of limiting stakes, more importantly, with the political leadership in Pakistan not determining such issues, this domain is controlled exclusively by the Pakistan Army, which will always project India as a bigger-than-life threat and seek to avoid discussion on limitation issues.

The second premise is of the concept of limited victory or as Bernard Brodie writes, “curtailing the requirement of unequivocal victory”.<sup>16</sup>

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Pakistan, in its revisionist agenda, historically, has perennially sought India's break-up and destruction, embedded in its pledge to take revenge for the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the policy of a ‘thousand cuts to bleed India’ and the failed attempts to break away Punjab and Kashmir from India. With this high level of distrust, and the agenda to destroy India, the very notion of limited victory, or curtailed requirement of victory, does not appeal to Pakistan; the idea may be feasible in conventional operations such as Kargil 1999, however, the military leadership

in Pakistan has always projected the perception that it will ultimately destroy India one day. From this point, they cannot be seen to be lowering the aim by advancing the concept of limited victory as it becomes stark in contrast to the notion of bleeding India.

The third aspect deliberately referred to “graduated military responses within the boundaries of contrived mutual restraints”<sup>17</sup> wherein the two powers agree on preventing mutual destruction and both agree to the same rules. This deliberation suffers from the same faults as the first two. Escalation is not easy to control when adversaries have grievances deep enough to fight over and cross nuclear thresholds, and yet, it is imagined that they will choose to fight by an “agreed set of rules”. It has been argued by Morton Halperia, “Graduated escalation could continue until both sides decide that it is not in their interest to expand the war. The necessary condition for the stabilisation of local war is the agreement with the decision system of each side and not agreement between the two sides, that further expansion is undesirable”. This certainly is not possible in the case of Pakistan, as the decision-making system is controlled by the Army and not the political leadership.

The fourth belief in escalation control was an agreement on “established thresholds”.<sup>18</sup> The thought suffers fundamentally from the same issue as above: when there is no agreement on rules, graduation of responses, limited stakes and limited aims/victory, the scope of establishing thresholds is directly linked to confidence-building measures, and in their absence, remains a frozen factor.

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The fifth factor which can bring in escalation control pertains to “absence of escalation dominance”.<sup>19</sup> The deep-rooted primordial hatred of partition on religious lines and Pakistan's revisionist agenda is the primary driver which seeks escalation dominance. On the contrary, the self-styled strategy on Pakistan's part to achieve escalation dominance at the outset of hostilities is embedded in the early and suicidal use of TNWs.

The sixth belief is that escalation control is feasible in deterrence strategies, and not in nuclear war-fighting strategies.<sup>20</sup> India and Pakistan are on opposite sides of the coin in so far as nuclear strategies are concerned. Therefore, convergence is not achievable on escalation control. The deterrence strategy provides time and space to decide on employment of nuclear weapons even in the preemptive mode. Whereas, when the conflict escalates on the conventional plane, the strategic consequences are not weighed by the commanders who will eventually employ TNWs – making the probability of strategic escalation greater, and most certain.

### **Escalation, Control, and Operational Problem Areas**

Besides the above-mentioned and discussed beliefs and notions, there are some problem areas in escalation control with nuclear weapons which pose their own dilemmas.<sup>21</sup> This needs to be applied in the India-Pakistan scenario, to examine if these can, in fact, be overcome to control escalation.



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The first is that “adversaries plan differently, with each side having its own inclination” i.e. each side has different objectives, planning parameters and aims.<sup>22</sup> The contrast and divergence between India’s and Pakistan’s objective is so deep and wide that Pakistan seeks to destroy the very identity of India, whereas Indian plans have sought a degradation of Pakistan’s military capability. The past is indicative of differing planning parameters, as is available from old war documents and historical records, and the

future will be no different.

The second is lack of communication between the adversaries during a crisis and breakdown during war.<sup>23</sup> Even during peace-time, the two countries do not talk or communicate with each other, but, at each other. In any future conflict, the situation will remain the same. Politically, the dialogue may exist but Pakistan’s military, especially the Army will communicate through other channels and India’s political leadership will find it problematic to connect with the “deep state”.

The third problem relates to varying and different intelligence inputs and interpretation of the other side’s aims and objectives.<sup>24</sup> The Command, Control, Communication, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities of both countries have improved ever since nuclear weapons entered their arsenals, however, there is no guarantee that correct, accurate, real time information and the right inferences will be derived from them. The voids and gaps in intelligence will lead to wrong or incorrect decisions, further aggravating escalation.

The fourth issue is of the irrationality of states during war, with political and domestic compulsions<sup>25</sup> forcing states to adopt policies

that prevent logical decision-making. South Asia is witness to the great danger of irrationality having seen so much violence for unfathomable reasons. While the world moved on to higher levels of the human index, the subcontinent is still mired in primordial thoughts and ideas, which surely shall reflect in the decision of a nuclear war.

The fifth difficulty lies in different decision-making systems,<sup>26</sup> each developed and based on the experiences of the past, and strategic thoughts central to the respective decision-makers.

The sixth area of concern is the dissimilarity of decision-making processes between India-Pakistan which is a study in distinction, with one being an out-and-out military-centric control, and the other, a constitutional democratic institutionalised decision-making apparatus. The military system does not lend itself to welfare and abhorrence of violence and destruction; while, on the other hand, a constitutional democratic institution takes decisions based on people-centric and welfare policies.

The seventh problem area is a breakdown of command and control.<sup>27</sup> Once nuclear weapons are used, the chances of a breakdown in command and control can occur due to a variety of reasons to include communication disruption, destruction of command posts, Electro-Magnetic Pulse (EMP) interference, collapse of will and leadership decapitation.

Besides, accidental occurrences and the fog of war constitute the eighth and ninth dilemmas.<sup>28</sup> Accidents have greater probabilities of occurrence when TNWs are employed with delegated authority: one set of launches may escalate vertically to spiral out of control – the chance of

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this with Pakistan is high, given the propensity of Pakistan's military to be irrational and inclined to excessive injudiciousness. The fog of war in normal circumstances creates greater dangers and adverse situations than actual – having a multiplier effect during nuclear weapons use. The basic thinking in the Pakistan Army is not to being seen as the losing side and they will apply the adage “use them or lose them”, hence, the chances of escalation increase.

Opacity of the arsenal size<sup>29</sup> is the tenth problem. Uncertainty creates ambiguity in the minds of decision-makers about the damage that the adversary can inflict, what is retained, and what are the pending consequences at each stage of the nuclear conflict.

The eleventh, and final barrier to escalation control is, when confronted with defeat, the reaction is not predictable<sup>30</sup>, but a losing nation will escalate in the dying hope of a desperate final victory. The arguments against escalation control between India and Pakistan are many and where some agreement is feasible, it is deterred by the decision system of Pakistan where the controls lie with vested interests. They find an echo in Michael Krepon's writings in which he argues, “Try as they might, US deterrence strategists were never able to offer a persuasive case on how escalation could be controlled, while seeking an advantageous outcome once the nuclear threshold has been crossed”.<sup>31</sup>

This paper does not seek to address the subject of how and why India and Pakistan will go to war, the reasons, crisis escalation, etc, but a few important issues that merit attention are spelt out forthwith. India does not wish to, and never has (as history is witness) initiated war against Pakistan. There is enough empirical evidence to substantiate this position. On the contrary, it is Pakistan that has initiated, and probably in the future too, will initiate, war on India. Pakistan has already been conducting a terror war against India through non-state actors and other proxies for more than the past two decades and also supporting insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Terrorism has, thus, become an established instrument

of its statecraft. India, in the past three decades, has demonstrated great resilience and tolerance to these continued attacks by Pakistan, having the ability to defeat the nefarious designs by means other than war. The Frankenstein monster of terror that Pakistan has created will be the snake in its backyard, with “no guarantee that it will only bite your neighbours and not you,” as Hillary Clinton once said. In an eventuality where its integrity is under attack, Pakistan is most likely to initiate war with India to divert the attention of its people from the inherent ills that plague the country rather than resolve them. The world community at large should plan to deal with a Pakistan that is out to threaten world peace, including a nuclear winter, a mutated population and a devastated regional environment.

### **Pakistan's Employment of TNWs in the Battlefield and its Fall-out**

Before discussing the actual use of TNWs by Pakistan, and India's potential response options, it is important to deliberate on related aspects of employment of the weapons between India-Pakistan. The range of the NASR and Abdali provides an employment range of 60 km and 180 km. The war-fighting method adopted by Pakistan is to defend its territory as far forward, at times even at the International Border (IB), implying deployment of TNW delivery and weapon systems at less than maximum ranges from the IB so as to threaten Indian targets on both sides of the border. The quantum of TNWs required to support its nuclear war-fighting strategy can only be estimated based on the length of the frontier, the terrain suitable for operations, the degree of destruction sought on ingressing forces and the depth to which such attacks will be conducted. Going by the NATO prescription, the numbers will be a few thousand; on the other hand, a few scores will certainly not be enough to be able to stop the Indian armed forces' offensives. The numbers required have to be more substantial, creating its own complex dynamics of security,

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footprints, signatures and delegation of authority.

The most often quoted scenario by a section of analysts is that of India making multiple ingresses into Pakistan with Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) as its Cold Start strategy (proactive doctrine) promulgates. They, however, fail to make any mention of the role of the TNWs of Pakistan's offensive formations, their role, and/or objectives, except offensive defence. Accepting the scenario for the evaluation of employment of TNWs, it must emerge that Pakistan will have to

use a very large number of TNWs at many places within Pakistan, the majority areas being Pakistani Punjab and moderately deep inside the IB. The Indian Army is well-trained to fight through an NBC environment and conduct operations with its mechanised forces which are equipped with NBC-proof equipment. These operations will continue, notwithstanding the larger politico-strategic response at the national level.

The main effect of the TNW usage against India will be, firstly, devastation of large tracts of Pakistan's own territory due to the nuclear fall-out and direct consequences of nuclear explosions (heat, blast and radiation at scales comparatively lower than bigger weapons, but still substantial enough); secondly, radiation of a reasonably big area within Pakistan; and thirdly, unleashing of radioactive clouds into the atmosphere, which will travel over other parts of the world; fourthly, destruction of urban and rural areas in the vicinity of the area of operations; and lastly, large-scale destruction of unprotected troops, but not mechanised forces.

This escalation from TNWs to strategic responses will result in large-scale destruction of counter-value targets, causing further problems of

damage, death and radiation across the whole world. All the lessons learnt by NATO would be equally applicable in the situation between India and Pakistan. Does the world order desire a radiated earth, with the feasibility of a nuclear winter? A 1980s US study<sup>32</sup> leaked by *Der Spiegel*, quoted casualty estimates of 3.1 million, in a densely populated area. In the specific case of South Asia, the casualty figures can be multiplied manifold. A 2007 article titled “Six Escalation Scenarios”<sup>33</sup> had concluded that if a nuclear war started between two adversaries, it would escalate to all the nuclear weapon states. By extrapolation, it is clear that a potential India-Pakistan War in the future will extend to other global stakeholders.

Compared to the days of the Cold War, technology has grown exponentially, improved and advanced C4ISR systems provide better transparency, and TNW forces deployed during the pre-war period will be detected to a very large extent. TNWs are different from normal deployments, for their locations in depth, communications equipment, and pattern of deployment areas, air defence troops and security troops for ground protection. These unique features will give out specific signatures to satellites, air reconnaissance and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), communication detection equipment and intelligence/Special Forces. These possible deployment areas offer plausible options of counter-action to India in order to eliminate or disable their use before and during war. These range from covert operations to destruction in nuclear retaliation, and in between lies the realm of cyber warfare, sub-conventional operations and preemption. The concept of conventional preemption significantly includes application of force by the international powers to prevent a nuclear holocaust by removing the TNW capability from Pakistan.

### **India's Response Options**

The location and deployment of TNWs by Pakistan offers India various options, including attacking these with Precision Guided Munitions

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(PGMs) i.e., hypersonic missiles; secondly, destroying the TNWs with air power; thirdly, employing UAVs and UCAVs (Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles) as potent means of destroying the deployed systems; fourthly, using Special Forces to destroy the delivery systems and communications; fifthly, using irregular forces to disrupt the functioning of TNW units; and sixthly and finally, employing

covert operations to achieve the same objectives. For exercising these options, there is no necessity to initiate ground operations till the set aims are achieved, which prevents employment of TNWs in the very first place.

The option of counter-force strikes by the conventional Prompt Global Strike (PGS) range of missiles will continue till the aim of removing TNWs has been achieved. The second option of an air war is initiated wherein counter-force targets will be the focus to destroy the TNWs' capability and simultaneously conduct counter-air operations to reduce retaliatory damage to own assets. The likelihood of a missile or air war remaining confined and limited remains remote. Pakistan, will, expectedly, initiate retaliatory *quid pro quo* strikes or exercise the option of ground operations to draw India into a situation where it can scare the world with its brinkmanship policy of nuclear war. The challenge for India and the world powers is to take out Pakistan's nuclear weapons, before they are employed on the battlefield. In this scenario, India will have a limited aim of eliminating the TNWs, in addition to the terror infrastructures. Besides the options discussed earlier, India can continue with a broad front proactive strategy or deliberate calibrated attacks at select locations or limited operations to conduct punitive strikes or stand-off attacks or hybrid warfare.

How, in fact, Pakistan would control escalation after initiating use of TNWs against India will remain a matter of debate and conjecture, but

the bigger problem will be how soon can it / will it, introduce strategic weapons in a crisis scenario? The lessons of the Cold War period on TNWs when contextualised to Pakistan bring out that these have not enhanced deterrence, rather they have lowered the nuclear threshold, have provided India and the world with preemption choices, and reduced the possibility and ground for confidence-building measures to be put

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in place – a set of regulations to control escalation. The delegation of authority to lower level officers in a TNW scenario is inevitable. If not done at the opportune time, it reduces the probability of employment. Let there be no doubt that the TNWs will have a very limited impact on Indian mechanised forces, but shall destroy large tracts of Pakistan's own territory.

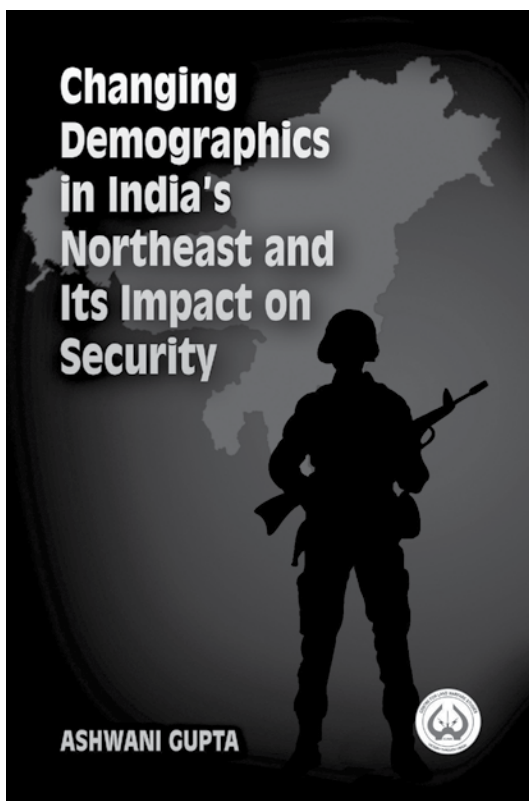
TNWs are not the panacea for all problems of the war zone. India has many options to deal with the threat, most significantly, to eliminate them by non-nuclear means before ground operations commence, and ultimately employing the strategy of massive retaliation to cause unacceptable damage. It is time for Pakistan to reassess its strategy and for the world to analyse and assess the dangers of the path that Pakistan has chosen to undertake – from terror to TNWs. India remains committed to its stated no first use nuclear policy, but cannot be bullied by a revisionist state. India has demonstrated its desire for peace and regional harmony, however, in a changing and dangerous world, it will most certainly not hesitate to defend its core values, national interests, and territorial sovereignty and integrity. It is time for the world to realise the folly of Pakistan deploying TNWs. The international community must take action to have these eliminated by all means at their disposal.



## Notes

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32. David O. Smith, "The US Experience with Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Lessons for South Asia," available at [http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/David\\_Smith\\_Tactical\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons.pdf](http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/David_Smith_Tactical_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf)
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