

A Conflict Strategy for India in the TNW Era

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Why Rule in TNW?

Consideration of the use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW) in an India-Pakistan conflict is usually held hostage to the optimist-pessimist debate. To deterrence optimists, nuclear deterrence will hold and, therefore, there is little to discuss. To pessimists, deterrence could break down and, therefore, options should be available. To the former, such options make deterrence more liable to break down in the first place. To the latter, the options reinforce deterrence in that the ability to respond in a situation of deterrence breakdown, prevents deterrence breakdown. A second line of argument between the two is in pessimists insisting that once breakdown is incentivised thus, and occurs, then escalation is ruled in, making TNW irrelevant after the initial exchange(s). Pessimists believe that the very idea of escalation is so horrendous, that escalation may not readily result, with the exchange(s) liable to be halted at the lowest threshold. Optimist would say that is impossible and, therefore, there is no call for any effort to make nuclear war appear fightable; but to pessimists, it is only impossible if no attempt is made to limit escalation, and de-escalate prior to, and during, hostilities. The debate is likely to carry on as it has since the Seventies during the Cold War but in the regional setting in South Asia.

Understandably, in the light of their security competition and largely adversarial relations, India and Pakistan are on different sides of this debate. India's declaratory doctrine seems to be informed by deterrence optimism; while Pakistan's unstated nuclear doctrine appears to be based on deterrence

pessimism. India's declaratory doctrine posits unacceptable damage in return for nuclear first use against it or its forces anywhere. Logically, its use of the term 'massive' seems to be to reinforce deterrence in that it brings home to Pakistan the unwelcome prospects of escalation for that state. This explains India's leveraging of its conventional advantage in its 'proactive' conventional doctrine. The optimistic understanding seems to be that deterrence will hold sufficiently for a measured conventional punishment meted to Pakistan.

Pakistan, on its part, appears nonchalant about pursuing tactical nuclear weapons as part of its 'full spectrum deterrence' formulation in keeping with its concept of deterrence which covers not merely the nuclear, but also the conventional, level. It believes that this enables deterrence against war, even while it races to restore the strategic balance, seemingly in favour of India in terms of second strike capability. Pakistan's deterrence pessimism comes through from its TNW turn in that it hints at its apprehension that its extension of nuclear deterrence to cover the conventional level may not hold, forcing nuclear first use on it. That it hopes for a graduated escalation is seen in its emphasis on TNW, hoping thereby to preclude escalation by nuclear first use at the lowest escalatory threshold, and with the lowest opprobrium quotient.

Since there is no initiative so far, despite the possibility having been bandied about at election time last year, of a nuclear doctrine revision, at the declaratory level, India persists with nuclear optimism. However, it cannot be said with conviction that this will remain the case with India's operational nuclear doctrine. India's operational nuclear doctrine may well be different and more responsive to nuclear developments on the Pakistan front, even if India chooses not to advertise any shift from its position based on nuclear optimism. Therefore, there is a possibility that India's operational nuclear doctrine may have an element of nuclear pessimism. India has possibly taken care not to own up to this so as not to incentivise Pakistani nuclear first use, in the belief that it can get away with a lower and, therefore, tolerable, punishment. India requires cauterising its conventional level from Pakistani nuclear first use. Any hint of its own contemplation of TNWs in response may incentivise Pakistani TNW use, thereby placing India's conventional forces in harm's way and with the challenge of facing a nuclear conflict.

However, it is clear that India's resort to its declaratory doctrine for informing its nuclear strategy in a conflict gone nuclear exposes India to strategic exchange(s). Compared to this, tactical nuclear exchanges may not harm mainland India to a similar extent. Between the two – having armed forces face

up to nuclear conflict and the population face up to a strategic nuclear exchange(s) – it can be expected that the democratic government in India may settle for the former. Therefore, it makes as much strategic sense for India to have tactical nuclear response options up its

sleeve as an unstated operational nuclear doctrine and to alongside keep quiet on any departure from its declaratory nuclear doctrine that this entails.

What the discussion above suggests is that TNW use cannot be ruled out. In any case, this is not for India to legislate on since it is a decision that Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD), serving Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), has arrogated to itself. What has been established in the discussion here is, that contrary to the strategic commentary in India that rules out TNW use by India, there is a possibility of India responding in a 'tit for tat' manner since it makes strategic sense to do so. Doctrine can only inform strategy; it cannot dictate it. This suggests that a future conventional conflict can go nuclear with the resort to TNW by both sides.

**Future Indo-Pak
conventional
conflict can go
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TNWs**

What TNW Use Entails

Nuclear Level

An appreciation of how this would play out is necessary at all three levels: nuclear, conventional and sub-conventional. At the nuclear level, the aim for India's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) would essentially be to modify the war aims for a war that has gone nuclear in the light of pre-existing and longstanding grand strategic aims. India would not like any of its three revolutions that are being undertaken simultaneously – economic, political and social – to be upturned or inordinately set back. A nuclear war has the potential to set these back considerably. India as a rising power may like to cauterise the long-term effects of nuclear conflict. In this, it would not be alone, in that Pakistan would also like to play along, aware that it would suffer disproportionately. The twin aims of the two states would have the facilitative weight of the alarmed international community. Therefore, the reflexive escalation that finds usual mention in strategic literature is unlikely to occur without a sufficient window for escalation control and bargaining.

At best, any exchanges in this window, as the political and diplomatic de-escalatory game plays out, would be of TNW. The Indian nuclear logic in this initial exchange(s) should follow game-theory-endorsed mirroring strikes. TNW

use for Pakistan would have two objectives: at the political level, it would be in a de-escalatory mode to message the crossing of thresholds and that India must desist from cashing in on the gains that have provoked the strike(s). At the operational level, the objective would be to redress any operational level asymmetries that India's offensives have generated. For India, TNW use would be to reflect its resolve. It would like to convey two messages simultaneously: one of determination not to be second best in any nuclear exchange(s); and two, a willingness to discontinue these in case Pakistan throws in the towel first. These would entail TNW strikes that are *quid pro quo* or a tad *quid quo pro plus*.

Since the scenario usually imagined is of Pakistani TNW use in a low opprobrium mode on its own territory in a defensive manner, India's reply would also be on Pakistani soil. This would in effect be a double whammy for Pakistan. It can only get out of this bind by escalating exponentially, a suicidal action. It would, therefore, be boxed into proportional escalation with the certainty that should it touch Indian soil in this, it would risk strategic exchange(s) – a slower but equally sure way to national suicide. What emerges is that even though the TNW genie is out of the bottle, TNW is what Pakistan would be restricted to and that too most likely on its own soil or, at best, in conflict zones on India's territorial periphery. India can, thus, afford to mirror Pakistan in TNW exchanges. The strategic level at which the nuclear exchanges are playing out would then be in conformity with the political level at which the politico-diplomatic de-escalatory moves are in play. A pitch that India's restraint will enable it at this level is that it be allowed to continue conventional operations to sufficiently punish Pakistan for its busting of the nuclear taboo, while an international clampdown on Pakistan's nuclear use is enforced.

Conventional Level

There are three options for conventional strategy: one is reliance on nuclear deterrence holding; the second, is preparedness to modify conventional strategy in the face of deterrence breakdown; and the last is to have conventional operations proceed under the assumption of Pakistani nuclear first use of TNW. The first is somewhat wishful. While the good health of India's deterrence is not in doubt, the strategic sense of the Pakistani leadership certainly is. The Pakistan Army has blundered before and can do so at a crunch. The second is desirable in that it caters for deterrence breakdown and also has contingency plans in place for coping timely. Since national war aims may be adjusted in the face of nuclear first use, so would military objectives and plans.

Pakistan's nuclear threshold is likely to be crossed by Indian cold start mobilisation

The third, proceeding with the assumption that Pakistan means what it says, may make the military overcautious, leading to it pulling its punches. The down-side of this is in India not exercising its conventional advantages, gained at the cost of national treasure, optimally. The upside is that a cautious war strategy and plans would put Pakistan in a political spot if were to nevertheless break the nuclear taboo despite India's restrained conventional strategy. It would put Pakistan in the political doghouse, open to military punishment. Such action prevents nuclear first use and, in the case of nuclear first use, enables using the political leverage so gained to advance military objectives.

This article is not the space for dilating on how such a conventional strategy needs working out. However, a bare-bones sketch is that India could unleash stand-off conventional punishment, not amounting to a Cold Start of Pakistan's nightmares. It could do creeping and selective mobilisation behind this, to both be in conformity with a crisis management profile of the run-up to conflict as also up the ante in case of failure of crisis diplomacy. Pinprick Cold Start offensives, such as by an Integrated Battle Group (IBG) or two, can serve notice on Pakistan. It could have a Cold Start lite up its sleeve in case Pakistani counter-moves gain threatening proportions. Allowing Pakistan's counter moves to play out may be a useful alibi from a political *casus belli* point of view. The offensive punch of a strike corps can be in reserve, awaiting a ripe moment for the launch of a Cold Start, even if no longer 'cold'.

It can be envisaged that Pakistan's nuclear moment is not when it is at the receiving end of stand-off missile, air, artillery and naval fire operations. The threshold is also unlikely to be crossed in case of pinprick IBG offensives. But it gains plausibility in the case of a Cold Start lite and increasingly so in the case of strike corps operations. In the case of TNW advent in the face of a Cold Start lite, the opportunity presents itself for the strike corps to follow through. At the political level, space must be created for the military punishment of Pakistan. This is possible in the case of demonstrated conventional restraint as depicted here, followed by nuclear restraint in a 'tit for tat' TNW response. The strike corps can then operate with relative impunity in the dust of initial TNW exchange(s). Relatively bold gains can be made in the mountain sector, employing the mountain strike corps, since TNW employment is unlikely in these areas owing to the proximity of the national capital region of Pakistan and the water flow considerations. What this discussion suggests is that India's

plans must be less of Cold Start and more of a slow boil and be capable of acceleration once Pakistan's TNW gambit is revealed as having less conflict ending potential than it hopes.

Sub-conventional Level

After the Gulf War II experience, it is clear that hybrid wars are what a state must prepare for, especially when forces are deploying in areas that have potential for Islamism. Pakistan has been at war with extremism, albeit a selective and partial one, for about a decade. Indian offensives will eventually find Indian troops in occupation of Pakistani territory, and reclaimed Indian territory in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). It can be easily appreciated that they will face an irregular warfare backlash. In case this is compounded by a prior nuclear outbreak, there is likely to be a political and leadership vacuum in Pakistan, particularly at the lower levels of administration. A clue to this can be seen in the manner the extremists managed to fulfil the requirements of an absent state when Pakistan was struck by the earthquake in 2005 and by floods later. Therefore, stabilisation operations will have a sub-conventional operations bias. As to how this will be accentuated by the nuclear factor may have figured in formation war-games, but has escaped discussion in the open domain so far.

India has two options: one is to persist in Pakistani territory and the second is to retrieve Indian territory, other than in J&K, at the earliest. The former has its basis in war aims, which may be to stabilise Pakistan in order that it does not continue to pose a post war threat to India. This may be in league with the right thinking elements in the Pakistani polity and society, including factions within its military. It may include those in charge of its nuclear arsenal. This may be in conjunction with international organisations and key actors, including the US and China, lending a helping hand to stabilise Pakistan. On the other hand, the latter may, on account of prudence, be dictating that there is no reason to offer a magnet for terrorist impulses of extremist forces in Pakistan. If the right thinking forces are at a low ebb in Pakistan, there may be little that India can do but to contain a truncated, nuclear contaminated Pakistan.

In either case, and during the course of conventional operations, India would have to contend with an Islamist counter. Alongside, would be societal effects of TNW use, such as refugee flows and heightened civil-military issues such as disaster management. There would, therefore, have to be three lines of action. One is that the offensive formations will have to undertake their own anti-terrorist measures. Second is in additional formations, possibly the Rashtriya Rifles (RR),

to undertake communication zone pacification. And last is the paramilitary, for handling the increased population control measures. Clearly, both the RR and paramilitary will be at a premium, particularly as calls from disaster management requirements within India, especially those stemming from nuclear blasts, will assume priority. Therefore, the Army's contingency plans will need keying in prior to the operations. A major facet of these will be to sensitise the soldiery of the need to distinguish between the extremists and the people. Any identification between the two should not owe to India's sub-conventional operations. This has been the principal takeaway from wars in this century.

Conclusion

Thinking about TNW use has been drowned out by the dominant narrative in the nuclear strategic discourse in India that there is no such category. All nuclear weapons are strategic weapons. This is to serve India's declaratory deterrence doctrine that any nuclear weapons use against India or its forces anywhere would meet with nuclear retribution. The problem with this postulation is that it prevents thinking such as carried in this paper that could productively inform conflict strategising within the military. Whereas the military may be undertaking such thinking independently and confidentially, there is no reason for a blackout in the strategic literature. In fact, loud thinking such as here, may help with deterrence, in that it communicates to Pakistan's SPD that its expectations of nuclear stumping of India may be unfounded in the light of India's prior thinking through its responses and being prepared accordingly. An Indian military that is prepared for undertaking conventional operations in nuclear conditions will enable greater flexibility to the Political Council of India's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA). It then does not reflexively have to approve a nuclear strategy based on the declaratory doctrine. India's operationalisation of the nuclear deterrent, which involves a greater military input and interface than hitherto with the nuclear field, must also push for an operational nuclear doctrine, which even if kept secret, is a departure from the declaratory doctrine.

A nuclear strategy that envisages TNW employment as depicted here must follow game-theory endorsed 'tit for tat' exchange(s), at least at the lower end of the nuclear spectrum. This will convey resolve and allow Pakistan a face saving exit. In being de-escalatory, thus, it will create a political and moral high ground for India to continue conventional operations. Conventional operations must, first, be premised on caution, and, second, must be capable of upgrading in violence once international political-diplomatic pressures ensuing on induction of TNW

succeed in restraining Pakistan. Conventional forces can expect a sub-conventional backlash from Pakistani extremists. Conflict strategy must have an exit game-plan in play. If persisting on occupied territory is required, then it must be in conjunction with the right thinking elements in the Pakistan polity, society and its Army.

TNW are here to stay. Like other weapons, they cannot be uninvented. Consequently, discussion on their effects and the possibilities and options they open up must be part of the professional regimen. The current silence on such issues is untenable and can prove to be paralysing later. There are issues that have not been covered here but warrant equal attention, such as the effects on the fighting troops' morale and discipline, on the management of families in cantonments close to the border, etc. Approaching nuclear conflict as a different conflict environment enables clarity in such matters. Even if in the event it turns out that the nature and character of conflict does not really change, nuclear conflict will make demands that can be expected to put our earlier experience of relatively gentlemanly wars in the subcontinent into the shade.

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