Pakistan's flirtations with Tactical Nuclear Weapons

ADITI MALHOTRA

Nuclear Deterrence theory in the context of India and Pakistan is rather unique. Pakistan's quest for the possession of nuclear weapons was largely motivated with the intent of bridging its conventional military gap with India. This also gave Pakistan the newly found enthusiasm to wage sub conventional conflict without the risk of inviting a conventional military retaliation by India. One can infer that deterrence worked during the Kargil War, Operation Parakram, the 26/11 terrorist strikes in Mumbai and India restrained itself from undertaking punitive military actions.

Conflict under a nuclear hangover has given prominence to the concept of limited war. It has also compelled both the countries to rework their warring strategies. India has had to reconsider military options to deal with Pakistan in a way that minimises the scope of a large-scale nuclear war and enhances the utility of its sizeable conventional force. This gave birth to the Indian Army's 'pro-active strategy' also termed as the Cold Start Doctrine by the media and scholars. The pro-active operations strategy was a result of the failures and lessons learnt during Operation Parakram. The new strategy endeavours to fight a limited war in the nuclear overhang as a response to a conventional attack from Pakistan, by employing "quick thrusts by small integrated battle groups in the event of hostilities."[1] As New Delhi unveiled its pro-active operations strategy, Rawalpindi scrambled to seek a new strategy to counter what it perceived was India's offensive designs on its territory.

The Pakistan Army realised that it would be difficult for it to conventionally

counter shallow strikes by "all-arms" integrated battle groups of the Indian Army launched simultaneously all along the International Border in the event of a war. It has therefore sought an answer to this challenge in the form of developing and deploying Tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs). TNWs can be described as lower-yield nuclear weapons designed for usage on a battlefield to denote limited war; as opposed to strategic nuclear weapons that may be used as political weapons of deterrence or aimed to devastate an adversary's population centres or disrupt its war waging capabilities. For Pakistan, TNWs present a grand force-multiplier that can dissuade India from undertaking pro-active operations that crosses Pakistan's undefined redline.

In April 2011, Pakistan conducted its first test of the Hatf-IX or Nasr which has a range of 60 km and is capable of carrying "nuclear warheads of appropriate yield with high accuracy".[2] Analysts in Pakistan instantly hailed the test as a counter to India's pro-active strategy. Tanvir Ahmad Khan, former foreign secretary of Pakistan confirmed to *Kyodo News* that Pakistan army's decision to increase the number of nuclear-capable short range missiles was a response to India's Cold Start Doctrine (as referred by Pakistan).[3] Shireen Mazari, Pakistan's hawkish security analyst acclaimed their tactical nuclear capability and stated that it acted as a "deterrent against use of mechanised conventional land forces".[4]

In the same month, another short range air launched cruise missile, Hatf VIII or Ra'ad was tested which bears a range of 350 km.[5] The stealth design missile is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. The year marked the commencement of a new factor in South Asian nuclear equation i.e. the TNWs. Interestingly, the utility of TNWs were downplayed immediately by Indian and Pakistani spokespersons after their nuclear tests in 1998.[6] However, it appears that these weapons would prove to be more decisive in future wars and affect the nuclear deterrence in the subcontinent.

In March 2012, Pakistan tested yet another short-range nuclear capable missile, Hatf II or Abdali[7] which has a range of 180 km. Just two month later, Islamabad conducted the second testing of Haft-IX; evidently highlighting the importance it attaches to TNWs and its relevance in its next conflict with the Indian forces. Official reports indicate that Pakistan has attained an operational level capability of deploying TNWs. At this juncture, it is worth noting that Pakistan's warhead designs have for long been based on highly enriched uranium (HEU) but reliable sources such as SIPRI have asserted that the country is shifting towards a plutonium based arsenal. This is a favourable option for Pakistan's military as plutonium based warheads are lighter and compact[8] which

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makes it easier to mount on smaller missiles and use on the battlefield. What is more concerning is that Islamabad's plutonium-based nuclear stockpiles are swelling by the day.

The use of these weapons is bound to affect the nuclear deterrence dynamics in South Asia and allow Islamabad to stage nuclear warheads on a "more launch-ready posture".[9] The prevalence of TNWs clearly limits the space for Indian forces to maneuver in a limited conventional war and also emboldens Pakistan's foreign policy. On the other hand, a lot also depends on India's decision to field its own TNWs in response to Pakistani TNW capability build-up, leading to another weapons race in South Asia.

Disturbing the Nuclear Equation in South Asia

Nuclear weapons that remained strategic in nature meant inflexible usage thereby relatively stabilising the nuclear deterrence equation in South Asia. In contrast, the possible use of TNWs would destabilise the already precarious situation due to the flexible nature of their usage.

TNWs are compact which can be fired from artillery guns making its utility more relevant in the battlefield for use against military targets. In view of TNW's limited blast radius, lower damages and localised usage, Pakistan could use them against a variety of military targets. The phobia associated with the usage of a strategic nuclear weapon is taken away by a TNW, the damage of which is 'considered' relatively 'acceptable'. TNWs are Pakistan's insurance against a perceived defeat dictated on Indian terms which lowers the nuclear threshold during an Indo-Pakistan conflict.

Another area of complication in deploying TNWs is its command and control (C2) structure. When deploying such weapons on the battlefield, C2 may be delegated to the operational units. The dynamics of the battlefield are largely different from the strategic central command, which increases the likelihood of TNW usage by field commanders in adverse situations where they believe that they have to either "use them or lose them".[10] The possibilities of misuse, miscommunications, miscalculations and accidents also increase greatly when such weapons are not under a centralised command structure. This is further substantiated by the fact that Pakistan would have to deploy a large number of TNWs during a conflict in order to credibly deter Indian offensive operations.

The usability of TNWs renders the nuclear deterrence ineffective and increases the risk of fighting a limited war with nuclear weapons, no matter how small. This adds another layer of complexity to the current unpredictable and unstable nuclear equation shared between New Delhi and Islamabad. This also makes the potential to engage in a full-blown nuclear exchange more probable. Additionally, Pakistan would have to factor in the fallout of a TNW strike on its own forces operating in close proximity of the target area in a conventional battlefield.[11] This factor cannot be ignored by Pakistani planners when debating the idea of deploying TNWs or attacking Indian forces on Pakistani soil.

Indian Response

How would India react to a first use tactical nuclear strike by Pakistan? This remains a question of much concern not only to Pakistan's military but also to the Indian decision makers and planners. A Pakistani tactical nuclear attack on Indian forces is most likely to be carried out when it is certain of a local military defeat. In case of such a use, would India retaliate with a massive nuclear strike imposing unacceptable damage, given the 'limited' nature and geographical confines of TNWs?

India's draft nuclear doctrine states that "nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere" and would invite "massive retaliation". What is interesting is the use of word 'anywhere'. This signals that any nuclear attack on Indian forces even on Pakistani territory would invite a massive retaliation.

It is also important to bring to light the statement made by former Indian Air Chief Marshal PV Naik who in response to a question of Nasr's capabilities unequivocally stated that, "Tactical or strategic, it is a nuclear weapon. So, obviously our response would be absolutely violent as per our existing policy. I don't think it is a game-changer."[12]

However, one cannot but question the practicability of such a proposition. It remains to be seen how politically and diplomatically feasible would it be for the Indian government to respond with a massive and unacceptable attack when faced with a tactical use of a low-yield nuclear weapon. The decision to escalate the conflict would lie with India, which would be expected to either surrender or response heavily and violently. But at the same time, Pakistan should not consider flirting with nuclear weapons, however light it may be in terms of yield and range. The introduction of nuclear weapons would immediately bring about international condemnation on it and strengthen support and sympathy for India.

India too has the potential to respond with its short-range nuclear capable missiles such as Prithvi and Dhanush. However, would an Indian tactical nuclear response correspond with its doctrinal propagation of unacceptable and massive response? The shortest range of Prithvi I (150km) can easily reach Pakistan's cities that are near the Indo-Pakistan border. Any use of TNW from the Indian side would invite an escalation of the war to another level of nuclear exchange.

The situation involving TNWs in an Indo-Pakistan conflict is highly complicated and doctrinal declarations do not always bind a country during adverse situations with innumerable factors weighing for or against a decision. The prognosis may even illustrate Pakistan's so called 'game-changer' against a perceived Indian offensive war doctrine may not offer the level of success it has hoped for and is not likely to majorly impact Indian military options in the event of a conflict.

For the present, it must be realised that Pakistan's efforts towards alarmingly multiplying its inventory of short-range nuclear tipped missiles not only poses the risk of escalating the nuclear arms race in South Asia but also increases the vulnerability of such weapons falling into the hands of terrorists and non-state actors alike. Needless to say, the introduction of TNWs in South Asia is only going to complicate the application of nuclear deterrence theory and possible military options planned by both the countries.

Aditi Malhotra is an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.

Notes

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2. Pak's Hatf-9 missile aimed at India's 'Cold Start' doctrine: Analysts, April 20, 2012, The Indian Express, http://www.indianexpress.com/news/paks-hatf9-missile-aimed-at-indias-cold-start-doctrine-analysts/778736/0, accessed on August 15, 2012.
3. Pakistani Missile Seen as Response to India's "Cold Start" Strategy, April 21, 2011, Global Security Newswire, *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/pakistani-missile-seen-as-response-to-indias-cold-start-strategy/, accessed on August 16, 2012.
4. http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article1709352.ece
5. Pakistan tests Hatf-8 cruise missile, *Times of India*, April 29, 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-04-29/pakistan/29486845_1_cruise-missile-raad-conventional-warhead, accessed on 16 August, 2012.
6. Michael Krepon, Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Spotlight, April 24, Stimson, http://

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7. The missile was previously been tested in the years 2002, 2005 and 2006.
8. Pakistan loading up N-weapons: Report, April 12, 2012, *The Nation*, http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/islamabad/12-Apr-2012/pakistan-loading-up-n-weapons-report, accessed on August 17, 2012.
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10. Rajesh Basrur, South Asia: Tactical Nuclear Weapons and strategic Risk, *RSIS Commentary*, http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0652011.pdf, accessed on August 16, 2012.
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12. Pak n-arsenal no concern, violent response if attacked: Air Chief, July 27, 2011, *The Indian Express*, http://www.indianexpress.com/news/pak-narsenal-no-concern-violent-response-if-attacked-air-chief/822872/0, accessed on August 13, 2012.