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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan's Nuclear Deterrence:

From 'Credible Minimum' to 'Full Spectrum'

A new strategic reality may be in the making in South Asia in the wake of the recent assertion by a top Pakistani official that his country has developed and deployed 'tactical' low-yield nuclear weapons to deter any Indian military move against his country. Now, the leaders of the two countries will need to face the challenge of strategic stability in their relations in this emerging context.

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's Prime Minister in the early-1970s, had declared that, should India develop a nuclear weapon, the Pakistanis, in order to have one themselves, would, if needs be, "eat grass or leaves for a thousand years". He might well have added "but not the humble pie". It was no surprise, therefore, that, in one of the most predictable outcomes in global nuclear weapon race, Pakistan's testing of such device followed that of India within two weeks, in May 1998. Almost immediately the world reacted negatively to both States (Notable exceptions were Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey who actually congratulated Pakistan; India had no such felicitations proffered from any such sources!). The tests led directly to Resolution

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author, not ISAS, is responsible for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

1172 of the United Nations Security Council, and the clamping down of economic sanctions on both countries. Powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, and the not-so-powerful ones as Australia and New Zealand were deeply unhappy. But India and Pakistan showed nary a care. Their global detractors, to them, seemed “paper tigers”, now that, to borrow a quote from a past Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, they had acquired “nuclear teeth”. Also predictably, the world began to learn to live with a nuclear-armed rivalry in South Asia. But not necessarily, peaceably. From time to time, apprehensions are spiked. One such occasion was in mid-October 2015, when Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry came public with a strategy for use of nuclear weapons by his country, earlier only implied, though overtly unstated.

Just as the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was about to set out for his trip to meet the US President Barack Obama, where he was likely to be urged severe nuclear restraint, Mr Chaudhry’s media remarks would have been designed to signal the strong position Pakistan would take. What he actually said was : “Pakistan has built an infrastructure near border areas to launch a quickest response to Indian aggression... Usage of such low-yield nuclear weapons would make it difficult for India to launch a war against Pakistan”. He was obviously referring to Pakistan’s possession of ‘tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs)’. Though no precise definition of such a category exists, it is taken to mean smaller yield, more precise warheads designed to be used through short-range delivery vehicles, or even as artillery shells, in battlefield or ‘theatre’ situations aimed at the opposing military, rather than the long range, strategic, ‘city-busting’ weapons which would most certainly cause huge and unacceptably large collateral damage. The implicit danger of such usage, of course, is that the adversary, in this case India, would most possibly not consider any number of ‘nuclear weapon casualties’ as acceptable, and would most possibly retaliate, with the conflict graduating into an all-out nuclear war, resulting in a ‘holocaust’. In other words, in ‘nuclear war-fighting’ there would be no winners, only losers.

Mr Chaudhry’s outlining of the strategy was reminiscent of the US strategy during the Cold War, known as the Schlesinger doctrine. This was a policy enunciated by the Defence Secretary James Schlesinger in 1974. It enumerated a range of hard military (also known as ‘counterforce’) targets as against softer civilian (also known as ‘countervalue’) targets, gradually escalating the level of exchange, leaving opportunities for negotiations as the ‘war-fighting’ progresses. The strategy was an alternative to what was earlier the ‘Single Integrated

Operational Plan' (SIOP) which was tantamount to hitting a large number of targets simultaneously, an almost certain prelude to 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD). Many critics viewed the Schlesinger doctrine as destabilising, as it erroneously accepted the possibility of a 'limited nuclear war'. To them, this was a mad idea, when it was the fear of MAD that was actually shoring up deterrence. Mr Chaudhry's policy statement would likely provoke similar reaction. A nuclear exchange, once unleashed, almost certainly cannot be halted.

But analysed further, Mr Chaudhry makes a point that is nuanced and at variance from the Schlesinger doctrine. He is not speaking about any broad war-fighting doctrine. He is merely stating that Pakistan would utilise its tactical nuclear capability to halt any military incursion by India based on its advantage of conventional superiority. In particular against India's so-called 'Cold Start strategy', which involves the quick occupation of a piece of Pakistani territory, holding it, and using it as a launch-pad for further military operations into Pakistan in response to any Pakistani aggressive action. India denies that 'cold start' exists, though on the face of it, it seems a perfectly feasible military action. In other words, for Pakistan a TNW would be just like any other ordnance to use to deter the enemy.

Given its short range, and given the fact that it is precise, it could, in a 'cold start' situation, be even used within Pakistani territory. This would be somewhat akin to NATO's nuclear 'trip-wire' principle, again during the Cold War, according to which the crossing of West German frontier by Soviet-led conventional superior forces would automatically provoke a NATO nuclear reaction. So, on balance the conventionally weaker side is more likely to use TNW because it would be thought to be more precise, targeted on combatants, involving lower casualties and lesser fall-out. The net result is that it lowers the nuclear threshold, i.e. increasing the possibilities of use of such ordnance in different contingencies. The weaker side would also assess that it gains from both ambiguity, and absence of clear red-lines, enhancing the prospects of a 'Thucydides syndrome' (so-called, after the Greek philosopher who explained the causes of the Peloponnesian war by stating that 'when Athens grew strong, there was great fear in Sparta'), that is action emanating from a misperception of the adversary's power potentials.

This tactical capability of Pakistan is largely owed to a solid-fuelled ballistic missile, with a range of 60 km and capable of mounting a sub-kiloton warhead probably test-fired on several occasions, but most conclusively in September 2014, rather dauntingly named HATF (1x) whose literal translation is ‘vengeance’ (Pakistanis and Indians seem to have a penchant for giving their weapons fearsome names, to add to the perceptions of their lethality; for instance, the Indians have named their sole nuclear submarine ARIHANT, meaning ‘killer of enemies’). This test-firing had the full backing of the Pakistani military, as on that occasion, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Rashid Mahmud congratulated scientists and engineers on “achieving yet another milestone towards Pakistan’s deterrence capability” (though, some allege, this missile has an uncanny resemblance to the WS-2 Weishi Rockets system developed by China’s Sichuan Aerospace Corporation).

Time was when Pakistan’s preferred option was said to be ‘minimum credible deterrence’ that would involve the use of nuclear weapons almost as the last resort. But for some time now, powerful military strategists, such as the longest-serving former head of Strategic Plans Division, which spearheads the nuclear contingent, General Khalid Kidwai, had been urging the development of effective shorter-range military weapons precisely for this kind of use. It is possible that technology could, over years, lead to the creation of tiny nuclear warheads not easily distinguishable from conventional weapons thus concealing the fact of its use, though it is unlikely to happen for some time to come. Now that it is tested and ready, and senior officials have publicly spoken of the possibility of its use, albeit under limited circumstances, Pakistan’s concept of minimum credible deterrence appears to have morphed into a far riskier and dangerous “full spectrum deterrence”, implying usage of nuclear weapons for tactical (short-distance) to strategic (long-distance) targets.

Happily, however, the Chief of Pakistan’s military, General Raheel Sharif, gives every impression of being a rational mind, more focussed on bringing calm to his troubled land. The leaders of the Pakistan Foreign Office apparatus, Advisor Sartaj Aziz, a Pashtun from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Special Assistant Syed Tariq Fatemi, bred in Old Dhaka, Bangladesh, are known to be sagacious, sound, and seasoned diplomats. Their Indian counterparts, in particular Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar, who is said to have his political masters’ ears, are said to be equally adept at his profession. It is truly a ‘Greek meets Greek...’ situation. What must be avoided is the rest of the phrase ‘...then comes the tug of war!’ The *Economist*, half a decade

ago, had described the India-Pakistan relations as “a rivalry that threatens the world”. It remains a challenge for the two countries to disprove that contention.

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