

THE ENIGMA OF PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR DETERRENCE: AN ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVE

*Aezaz Aizad Amin**

Abstract

Pakistan has developed its nuclear and missile programmes primarily in response to perceived threats from India. Pakistani officials claim that these capabilities are for self-defence, aiming to deter India from initiating a war. However, Indian military strategists have consistently explored options to overcome these deterrent measures. Applying the theoretical models of the “Concept of Deterrence”, “Agreed Battles”, and “Iterated Game Theory”, existing gaps in Pakistan’s understanding and projection of deterrence against India, coupled with its displayed behaviour, have been analysed. It has been found that the current pattern is bolstering confidence in the Indian leadership that the application of military instruments against Pakistan is possible and will achieve political goals. The key to addressing this issue lies in Pakistan, recognising that deterrence is ongoing. Effectively managing nuclear deterrence involves a strategic interplay of intent, capability, and communication, with a crucial emphasis on continual adaptation to maintain effectiveness.

Keywords: Nuclear Deterrence, South Asia, Nuclear Policy, Strategy, Agreed Battles.

Introduction

The contemplation of a war between two nuclear-armed states, an unprecedented occurrence in the annals of human history, prompts a host of inquiries into the very nature, character, initiation, and termination. The discussions on the issue are steeped in subjectivity and speculation, devoid of empirical evidence unless such a war occurs. However, we can take “Nuclear policy” as a starting point to contemplate one, which broadly refers to the state’s strategies and decisions on the development and potential employment of nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding the definition of a ‘nuclear-armed state’ in the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty – 1968, there are several states which possess nuclear weapons, whether recognised as such or not, including Pakistan and India.¹

Pakistan’s hot nuclear tests of 1998 in response to India’s are considered as its declaration of its nuclear-armed status for the whole world. But even before that, Pakistan had been showcasing its missiles, which it had ‘indigenously developed’ in response to India’s, some even capable of carrying nuclear weapons.² Commencing with the induction of the Hatf series missile into Pakistan’s military arsenal in 1989, the country has already announced its possession of Hatf-1A, Hatf-1B, Hatf-2, and

*Aezaz Aizad Amin holds MPhil degree in Political Science. The author can be reached at aezazamin@yahoo.com.

Hatf-3 by the time it conducted open testing of its nuclear technology in the remote area of Chaghi in Western Balochistan. Post-nuclearization, Pakistan developed and tested several different missiles, including Shaheen, Ghauri, Babur and, lately, Nasr. Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missile stockpiles have continued to grow. As of 2023, it is perceived to possess approximately 170 nuclear warheads, which six different types of missiles can carry.³

The nuclear policy of Pakistan detailing how Pakistan intends to employ her nuclear weapons has been a longstanding topic of discussion in academic circles. While the Government of Pakistan has never given an official stance on this, several talks by various experts and ex-government officials are quoted to determine Pakistan's nuclear policy. Within Pakistan, several scholars contend that Pakistan's nuclear capability is a deterrence against Indian aggression. Smruti Pattanaik, an expert in international relations and security issues, opines that Pakistan's nuclear policy is primarily based on its threat perception from India.⁴ However, she adds other dimensions to it as well, linking it to Pakistan's intent to retain force parity with India and its desire to employ nuclear capability to project the Kashmir issue on the international stage, framing it as a nuclear flashpoint. Bruno Tertrais, a French political scientist and expert in international relations and security studies, asserts that Pakistan's credible minimum deterrence has been constantly reaffirmed and translated into four objectives.⁵ First, it is deterrence-based, primarily India-centric. Secondly, credibility is manifested by building a compelling mix of conventional and strategic forces that can damage India considerably. Thirdly, it seeks to avoid pre-emptive strikes through protection and bolsters strategic stability in South Asia.

Paul Kerr and Mary Nikitin have analysed Pakistan's nuclear policy and concluded that it appears to be designed to hedge against India's increase in nuclear arsenal and to deter conventional threats from India.⁶ They assert that Pakistan's concept of credible minimum deterrence has transformed into 'full spectrum deterrence' with built-in ambiguity. The introduction of tactical nuclear weapons in Pakistan's inventory is believed by the Pakistani side to have strengthened strategic stability, blocking avenues for high-scale military operations by Indians. However, experts opine that this proposition has specific challenges. The risk of a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan has increased owing to a possible lapse in the Command-and-Control system of tactical nuclear weapons. This is due to the portable nature of tactical nuclear weapons suggesting a relatively decentralised employment. Secondly, with this new capability, Pakistan might be tempted to use it to counter possible Indian preemption in counterforce mode, provoking a disproportionate response from India.

In all the discussions and views, one common aspect of Pakistan's nuclear policy, analysed by almost every expert and asserted repeatedly by government officials and Pakistani leadership, is its focus on deterring India from venturing into using its war machine against Pakistan. Since 1998, it has been hoped by the Pakistani side that nuclear capability would continue to deter India. A considerable time has

passed since then, and both sides have evolved and matured their policies and strategies. It is now evident that Indian military thinking is increasingly confident in understanding the limitations of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence. This is encouraging them to think that they can employ force with impunity against Pakistan without invoking a nuclear response. Perhaps scholars and academic circles in Pakistan have still been unable to research and identify this gap in existing studies. There is something with Pakistan's nuclear deterrence that it is not deterring India from venturing into repeated use of force against Pakistan.

This study examines existing data on Pakistan's nuclear posture within the framework of "Deterrence Theory", Kahn's "Agreed Battles", and the "Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma Theory". It will also study on-the-ground events (Balakot incident) to identify patterns that can provide valuable insights into future conflict scenarios to comprehend the factors contributing to Indian confidence in perceiving 'space for war' and Pakistan's challenges in projecting the required deterrence.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks have been employed in this paper to study the issue. First is the 'theory of deterrence' discussed by several theorists, foremost amongst them being Thomas C. Schelling (1966).⁷ Later works include Petrick M. Morgan's "Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis".⁸ In recent times, Michael J. Mazarr, in a very informative article titled "Understanding Deterrence", published by RAND Corporation in 2018, summarises the whole concept in a few pages. The theory has its roots in the nuclearisation of the US and the erstwhile USSR, how possession of a capability can and should deter an adversary, and how that can be used to pursue the country's national interests. The basic theory defines certain essentials for *deterrence* to work. The main idea is to invoke a fear of unacceptable cost in the adversary's mind should he pursue a particular course.⁹ This fear is instilled through the possession of a specific capability. But mere possession does not work. The adversary should know about it and believe with a considerable degree of surety that it will be used as being communicated. And that there is no immunity, and the damage would invariably be unacceptable. Hence, clarity in communicating the deterrence, willingness to inflict harm, and the ability to cause unacceptable damage are fundamental preconditions for deterrence to work.¹⁰

Another theoretical construct employed in this paper is Herman Kahn's idea of "agreed battles".¹¹ Kahn relates it to Max Springer and explains it as a state in which two warring states are locked in a state of conflict, both sides have rising tensions, and both acknowledge restrictions (on the use of force). There is essentially an "agreement" on limits to the use of force, though not necessarily a complete shared understanding, a commitment to continue with the limitations forever, or a conscious and explicit arrangement. Kahn identified two classes of strategies related to "agreed battle". One utilises the risks or threat of escalation beyond the agreed battle to gain an advantage, including red lines and forms of brinkmanship. The second class of

strategy relies on leveraging the risks or potential for escalation and eruption from the agreed battle. Practitioners of this second class of strategy deliberately seek to mitigate the risk of a full-scale eruption by setting a predetermined limit on the extent of their escalation.

The “Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma” provides valuable insights into comprehending opponents’ behaviours in a conflict scenario through repeated interactions. The theory is based on an opponent model with a choice of cooperating or defecting, each with consequences. The challenge is that each opponent will not know the choice made by the other, though he would be affected in terms of consequence by his own choice and the choice made by his opponent. By observing others’ responses to various strategies across multiple rounds, individuals can adjust and refine their strategies accordingly. This framework elucidates the intricacies of strategic decision-making, facilitating the formulation of practical approaches to navigate both cooperative and competitive scenarios.

Pakistan’s Nuclear Deterrence & Indian Military Thought: A Conceptual Debate

“Nuclear deterrence” is a complicated realm, and the lack of empirical evidence further confounds its understanding. Even countries that were the first to enter its realm, including the US and Russia, continue to explore and mature a host of theories and possibilities associated with nuclear deterrence. The massive destructive power of these weapons was considered to have enhanced stability at strategic levels, obviating World Wars-type scenarios. However, at the same time, it was felt that interstate competition and politics would increase stress at lower levels of conflict, the famous ‘stability-instability paradox’.¹² The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 was another watershed which exposed new ways a country could use nuclear weapons to coerce another and the dangers attached to such a proposition (nuclear brinkmanship), which could lead to ‘inadvertent nuclear exchange’ and problems of ‘crisis instability’.¹³ Recently, concepts like ‘conventional nuclear integration’¹⁴ and ‘strategic deterrence’¹⁵ have emerged that not only theorists are discussing but are also being war-gamed and matured by leading global powers.

Pakistan and India entered this realm in 1998. Since then, Pakistan’s nuclear policy has undergone various changes, taking the lead from the lessons and concepts from global powers like the US and Russia. However, these changes primarily responded to evolving requirements driven by Indian developments and ambitions in this field. A key figure in shaping Pakistan’s nuclear policy and security framework has been Lieutenant General (Retired) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai. He was the first Director General of Pakistan’s coveted “Strategic Planning Division”, which controls the development and, to a great degree, the employment of its nuclear weapons. General Kidwai was instrumental in shaping the organisation and gave his input in establishing Pakistan’s nuclear policy.

In late 2001, two Italians from Landau Network-Centro Volta Institute of Italy (an Arms Control institution which the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also consults), Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, visited Pakistan and met with several people associated with Pakistan's nuclear programme. During a discussion in their meeting with General Kidwai, he opined four instances in which Pakistan may employ nuclear weapons in response.¹⁶ These included India's military attack on Pakistan resulting in the capture of a large part of Pakistan's territory, India destroying a large part of Pakistan's Army and Air Force or India paralysing Pakistan's economy and finally, if India brings instability to Pakistan's domestic political situation by inciting riots within Pakistan. Shortly, this characterisation became a subject of deliberation and discourse at various forums within and outside Pakistan. Some experts contended that should Pakistan's nuclear policy be based on these principles, a significant latitude would remain for India to initiate and fight a war without provoking a nuclear response.

Indian military planners also noticed this.¹⁷ While Pakistan did mention using its nuclear weapons right at the onset of war, specifically in the Indian standoff of 2001, Indian calculus termed it a nuclear bluff.¹⁸ General Kidwai's parameters gave further credence to the conclusion that Indian military strategists were reaching in the early 2000s: that Pakistan did not intend to use nuclear weapons right at the onset. Based on this conclusion and other anomalies observed in mobilisation during the 2001 standoff, India developed its concept of "Cold Start", which later evolved into a strategy which now follows under the title of "Pro-active operations".¹⁹ The idea is to execute a quick but decisive limited conventional offensive into Pakistan before allowing enough time for the international community to intervene while remaining below Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold.²⁰ The design is not to destroy or defeat Pakistan right away but to embarrass it and discredit its armed forces, which essentially is the strategic centre of gravity of the nation. Having done so, it was believed that the stage would be set to weaken Pakistan and condition it for compliance or achieve even more significant political outcomes in the long term.²¹

The achievement of full spectrum deterrence in the second decade of the 21st century was boosted by Pakistani top brass as the demise of the Indian proactive operations strategy.²² The idea revolved around miniaturising nuclear technology to control and considerably localise the damage.²³ This meant that the shallow cuts the Indian military perceived to make in the event of war could now be responded to with a tactical nuclear (counterforce) strike, even within Pakistan's territory. Another strand of this 'deterrence' was achieved by developing "multiple re-entry vehicles", which could dodge the Indian elaborate missile defence system it has developed and beefed up through foreign procurements (the latest being the Russian S-400 system). Likewise, Pakistan now also projects its capability to launch nuclear strikes using all three platforms based on land, sea and air.²⁴ All this is to "deter India from using its military muscle against Pakistan" in any form.

Pakistan's response to the Indian nuclear threat has primarily centred on the acquisition and development of its multifaceted nuclear capabilities. However, it is crucial to understand that merely possessing such capabilities does not guarantee operative deterrence. While it forms a part of the equation, the other essential component of effective deterrence is the unambiguous expression and communication of the intent and willingness to employ these capabilities if necessary. This relation is a function of the strategic cultures, displayed behaviours and declared policies. A country's nuclear policy cannot exist as a standalone entity but must seamlessly align with the overarching defence policy. The cohesiveness between these two aspects is imperative because the war initiation, execution, and termination (components of the defence policy) are intricately connected to the means of war available to a State, including its nuclear arsenal.

Pakistan's de facto defence policy has certain broad cardinals that have remained constant throughout history. The foremost is its "India centricity"; there is a great deal of logic in having it that way. Pakistani leadership has also repeatedly asserted that Pakistan does not want war with India, but if India ventured into such an undertaking, it would have to face a befitting response.²⁵ In doctrinal terms, this is a classic '*Strategically Defensive-Operationally Offensive Strategy*'²⁶ which entails avoiding war initiation. A noteworthy aspect of this strategy is how it relates to the country's nuclear policy. Avoiding war initiation practically (as most Indian military planners seem to infer) adheres to and endorses the No First Use (NFU) policy through Pakistan does not officially affirm an NFU policy. However, its consistent stance of disavowing aggression or initiating war strongly implies adherence to such a principle, albeit without explicit declaration. There is nothing wrong with having such a policy. However, the problem arises when, in addition to the lack of any official word on its nuclear policy, Pakistani leadership continues to assert that its nuclear policy is *ambiguous*.²⁷ They say this ambiguity is deliberate and intends to create doubt in the adversary's mind, deterring her from contemplating the application of military instruments. But theoretically and practically (in the light of empirical evidence), it does precisely the opposite of what Pakistan intends to do.

Theory of Deterrence vis-a-vis Pakistan India Conundrum

Pakistan's assertion to deter war seems to contradict the established deterrence theory when contextualised in the backdrop of *deliberate ambiguity* and '*strategically defensive-operationally offensive strategy*'. While the deterrence theory predicates clarity in communication, the concept of ambiguity resides in creating opacity. The effectiveness of deterrence increases with the level of certainty and clarity in the mind of the party being deterred and the likely outcome of an action. Nevertheless, in Pakistan's case, this effectiveness is rapidly eroding due to two key factors. Firstly, Pakistan's nuclear posture and communication of deterrence do not align with established deterrence principles, which require capabilities to be supplemented by effective communication of the willingness to use them. Secondly, India continuously advances its nuclear and conventional policy and strategic domains

within the given environment, refining its approach through iterations of force applications, as seen in the Balakot strike and earlier incidents. Through these iterations, Indian military planners are increasingly gaining confidence in having a space for war before reaching a point where Pakistan contemplates using nuclear weapons against *Pakistan's perceived atomic threshold*.²⁸

However, these are not the only reasons for the confidence in the Indian military establishment. A host of other indicators also lead to similar conclusions. For instance, the command-and-control system of Pakistan's nuclear weapons is highly centralised at the top level while the weapons are kept in "de-mated" form²⁹, which would require considerable time to prepare these for launch. Another factor is the size of Pakistan's conventional forces, which is significantly oversized for a country which intends to rest its deterrence on nuclear weapons. All these things exhibit deliberate rationality, the antithesis of nuclear deterrence, which demands a more precise projection of irrationality (committal strategy).³⁰ It is alarming that Indian military planners have already employed their thoughts on the ground. Even more disturbingly, it proves steadfast in the sense that Indians perceive it.

Case Study – Balakot & Operation Swift Retort

The case study of Indian air strikes on Balakot and Operation Swift Retort in February 2019, as a response by Pakistan, does bring a great deal of clarity as to how both sides intend to fight. Indian strikes were in response to a terrorist attack on its police force in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K), for which it immediately blamed Pakistan.³¹ Employing a variety of aerial platforms, Indians struck what it believed was a terrorist camp, but open spaces in the mountains of Balakot Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan.³² Pakistan responded by targeting Indian military camps in IIOJ&K, controlling the strike by re-aiming the weapons towards open spaces just before impact instead of actual targets. Later, videos were released to convey that actual targets were deliberately spared since India had not caused any damage to Pakistan in their strikes. However, India lost two fighter aircraft in this battle, with one pilot captured (later released).

Even a cursory analysis, grounded solely in the events that transpired rather than those that did not, indicates that both countries employed military instruments. However, while India did so as it claims, Pakistan was purely in reactive mode, not deterring but fighting the war. Secondly, the Indian application of military instruments was purely calibrated, which remained well below Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold. Pakistan, on the other hand, "under-responded" by striking back in the disputed zone despite having received strikes on its mainland (an act of war by India). And finally, the outcome of a tactical battle that Pakistan boosted to win could have been otherwise. It cannot be taken as a yardstick to assess the whole play at operational and strategic levels. Interestingly, India effectively covered up for these losses through the cross-domain application of superior manoeuvre (in information

and diplomatic domains). It also favoured India in terms of self-catharsis, which it is very good at, to finetune its military application further, plugging the gaps observed.

Hence, the Balakot case study reveals that the ambiguity Pakistan intends to instil in the minds of Indian military thinkers is working the other way, fostering confidence in Indian military thought that applying force is possible without invoking a nuclear reaction.³³ India proved and matured its military thought through repeated tiny pricks and trials. Coupled with the application of other elements of national power, it is conditioning and inoculating Pakistan, carving space for the application of military instrument (aka 'war'), which is purely in line with its national interests, based on which are its security and defence policies.

Having refined the execution of the initial phase of a presumed war, should India be systematically developing its military strategic thinking based on the use of force to achieve political objectives, it may be progressing toward more advanced stages, accurately predicting Pakistan's behaviour by repeating the process repeatedly (iterated prisoner's dilemma). This is where Pakistan runs into more problems. The pattern suggests a dangerous proposition. While hereon we step into forecasting a war that has never occurred, the pattern indicates that it is possible and dangerous. Not only because India is increasingly looking to employ its military muscle but also because Pakistan is failing in deterring war, which she so adherently propagates.

South Asia in the Backdrop of 'Agreed Battles' Framework & Future Projections

Herman Kahn's "agreed battles" framework enables us to shed some light on this phenomenon.³⁴ According to Kahn, the "agreed battle" concept is rooted in escalation situations where both sides accept limitations, creating an implicit or explicit agreement. This agreement doesn't necessarily involve a shared understanding, long-term containment, or a conscious arrangement, but force use has some limitations.

This characterisation is closely related to the situation in South Asia. We see that both Pakistan and India have a tacit understanding of the limitations of military instrument use. Still, these limitations do provide room for Indians to manipulate the use of force, a strategy that leverages unique features at specific levels of escalation. And incredibly, if political aims are humbled, and other elements of national power are brought to bear on the target state to pursue a cumulative strategy, the application of military instruments becomes viable. This state can be effectively exploited to apply force if limitations are correctly understood (based on the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma), especially by the side which intends to use violence as an instrument of policy. That is what Indian military thinkers intend to achieve.

Where will it go? The pattern we picked in Balakot and Operation Swift Retort can be extrapolated within the constraints of the given environment, with a host of factors, most if not all, contributing positively towards the likelihood of a

limited war between Pakistan and India. These include economic conditions on both sides, application of indirect strategy by India, regional and global order and relevance of India, Indian political and diplomatic clout, regression in UN effectiveness, and many more. But before we extrapolate the events of Balakot and Operation Swift Retort, we should fix the point to which we should extrapolate. In the context of policy and strategy, that point would be the 'political aim of use of force (war)'. This is exceptionally important because we are studying an equation with certain limitations, wherein a larger pie of the responsibility to achieve long-term political objectives goes to other elements of national power (other than the military). As mentioned before, if political objectives are humbled for military instruments, it becomes relatively easy to employ them, hence "agreed battles". In the case of Pakistan and India, the spectrum can extend from discrediting Pakistan's military through controlled application of violence to general escalation and calibrated application of force. In the latter case, the strategy could be to operate long-term by initially degrading Pakistan's military potential through the limited application of force. Having done so without inducing a nuclear response, it would aim to exacerbate the situation (economic and military degradation) through the continued application of indirect strategy,³⁵ denying recuperation and inducing controlled chaos,³⁶ projecting it in the information domain, attracting global attention and convincing the world of the dangers attached to a 'would be' failing nuclear-armed state, especially in the backdrop of degraded military potential and lack of economic means to cope up.

Given this contemplated political end state, say discrediting Pakistan's military through controlled application of violence or degradation of its military potential subsequently exploited through indirect strategy, one can project with a fair degree of accuracy how the events would turn out to be in future. Pakistan is not into *first strike*; at least, the empirical evidence does suggest so. A No First Strike in the event of war initiation by India would inherently imply a 'nuclear interface' by Pakistan with the conventional level of war. Also, Pakistan has remained more rational (and calculated) than India. Should the two countries get embroiled in a limited war (given the past precedence), Pakistan's response will likely remain calculated and limited within the conventional domain. Should India choose not to escalate vertically, a limited counter-response by India would cause enough damage to Pakistan, which could be successfully exploited through the multi-domain manoeuvre but not enough to provoke a nuclear response.³⁷ At this stage of the perceived war, considering Pakistan's pattern of calculated reactions and a conceived nuclear interface, it is very probable that it will confine its responses to the conventional realm, particularly if the impact of Indian use of force remains localised. However, such an enterprise for even five to seven days would hit Pakistan's economy incredibly.³⁸ Coupled with multi-domain operations, India would be able to achieve its political objectives set for military instruments.³⁹ Furthermore, suppose Indians skilfully managed to employ indirect strategy in the mid to long term, with practical usage of other elements of national power. In that case, it can successfully cut Pakistan's stature to size, giving it more confidence to take a step further in the next round.

It is to be borne in mind that this conceptualisation of war between Pakistan and India is purely based on a projection of past “agreed battles”, the last being the Balakot strike and Operation Swift Retort,⁴⁰ in addition to the theoretical constructs of ‘Deterrence’ and ‘Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma’. The creation of this projection must be seen in the context of the behaviour of both sides depicted in the past. It can be wrong, but countries are predictable (especially in the context of Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma Theory) based on how they behaved in similar situations in the past (strategic culture). The state of agreed battles Pakistan has accepted, its decision-making cycle, the size of its conventional forces and the configuration of nuclear forces dictate a very calculated and rational posture, not projecting the kind of *irrationality* required to be communicated to *deter* a war.⁴¹ That is encouraging Indians to probe the pain threshold of Pakistan, resulting in cycles of limited military applications. Pakistan seems to fight back rationally and calculatedly within each cycle, as was evident in the 2019 incident. Its behaviour was calibrated, an *under-reaction*, remaining within a conventional domain and localised into the disputed zone. This further reinforces the Indian perception of Pakistan’s deliberate rationality, eroding the deterrence value of its nuclear arsenal and providing insights into Pakistan’s anticipated approach to conventional warfare.

One might argue that this conceptualisation is wrong and that Pakistan’s reaction can be disproportionate in the event of the following Indian provocation. If that is true, it does reveal the prospects of a full-scale war, which can lead to a nuclear exchange. Practically, for Pakistan, it would mean fighting a nuclear war and not deterring it. Either way, it harms peace in the region and the world.

Confident analysts and Indian thinkers also point towards the possibility of employing conventional instruments against Pakistan and the Indian understanding of Pakistan’s nuclear policy. The theoretical model of the ‘Conventional-Nuclear Interface’ proposed by G.D. Bakshi hypothesises an interface between conventional and nuclear deterrence by developing accurate escalation models (to comprehend responses by Pakistan and progression of conflict to higher levels) to mount credible conventional reactions to Pakistan’s (alleged) proxy wars. A prominent traditional attack across the international border, he believes, can cause degradation of Pakistani military capability and a blow to its economy, preventing rearmament.

Joy Mitra, a Delhi-based analyst on nuclear doctrine and conventional deterrence, has developed another theoretical framework that explores the possibilities of employing conventional force in South Asia’s nuclear environment. His “*Instrumentalized Conventional Strategy*”⁴² asserts the possibility of using conventional forces against a nuclear-armed state for coercion, escalation control, or intra-war deterrence. He believes that limited military incursions and targeted strikes are possible without triggering a nuclear response. By correctly understanding the adversary’s thresholds and exploiting ambiguity in their decision-making process, the strategy assures that theatre-specific capabilities/application and effective escalation

control can prevent nuclear escalation while allowing for force application at conventional levels.

Pakistan's Strategic Posture Voids

Pakistan's current strategic posture exhibits a skew towards nuclear deterrence preceding the commencement of hostilities. However, Pakistan's stance against initiating war, coupled with its nuclear ambiguity and iterated cycles of limited force application instilling confidence in the Indian military, suggest that the projection of deterrence is weak, potentially emboldening Indians to initiate hostilities. The rationality Pakistan has portrayed (practically) in the past further assures Indians of being able to limit the war within the conventional domain. If war occurs, there would be considerable military degradation and economic cost incurred by Pakistan, and the leaning once again would swing towards the nuclear realm beyond seven to ten days (as the degradation effect sets in). Within this time range, the war would remain within the realm of possibility, albeit transiently, for a safe duration of three to four and a maximum of up to five to six days. This temporal window potentially provides ample opportunity for Indians to realise their overarching long-term objectives, employing the military in conjunction with other elements of national power.

The void thus lies in three stages. The weakness of (projection of) initial nuclear deterrence leading to the outbreak of hostilities. In the second stage, a limited war of five to six days during which Pakistan is likely to fight while remaining within the conventional domain. Finally, having suffered and nearing exhaustion of traditional forces, interfacing conventional level with nuclear to terminate the war was the weakest and most dangerous proposition. Indians would stop well short of that threshold. At that stage, the conduct (continuation) of war through broader application of other elements of national power by Indians, stretched over mid to long term, switching between direct and indirect strategies can yield fruitful outcomes for India. Hence, there is a need for Pakistan to stop this process before war initiation.

Three crucial and interconnected fundamentals need to be considered vis-a-vis Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, which would serve as guiding principles for a course correction: -

- Theory of deterrence is central to nuclear deterrence and demands possession of capability and projection of clarity rather than opacity.
- Nuclear deterrence requires the *projection of deliberate irrationality*, which is not necessarily akin to pressing the button at first instance. Still, a precise deterring posture (not capability alone) communicates the danger of unacceptable cost.
- Predictable patterns can emerge by repeating a sequence (as in Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma) and can lead to improved understanding of opponents' behaviour, creating credibility in

evolving strategies. This is why Indians believe in space for war with Pakistan. Hence, there is a need to develop a deterring posture and constant projection of irrationality.

Conclusion

Many theorists believe that the nuclear factor will play a 'stabiliser' in the conflict equation of South Asia.⁴³ It is true, given that two nuclear-armed states never fought a war. But if one side is bent upon using its conventional muscle, and the other is not posturing to deter, the equation is not in equilibrium. The imbalance allows force application until achieving a desired equilibrium, favouring one side. The perceptions can change if the process is repeated, with intervals and in conjunction with other elements. The weapon can become a weakness instead of a strength. India is fast-moving in that direction. If India is successful in proving to the world that a conventional war is possible between two nuclear-armed states, it would not only be a great addition to the theory of war but also set a dangerous precedence for the rest of the world. Nuclear weapons are weapons of deterrence, but only if that deterrence is played according to the rules. Deterrence to work must be executed through all its preconditions, hence *rationality of irrationality*. If Pakistan aims to deter war effectively, it must disrupt the current cycle of limited, mutually acknowledged skirmishes it is engaged in with India (aka "*agreed battles*"). This requires shifting away from the status quo and developing a more robust and communicated deterrence strategy that showcases its capabilities and unwavering resolve to employ them if necessary. The voids in Pakistan's posture while remaining within the constraints and restraints of the environment and guided by the principles of deterrence theory can be addressed, articulating a more emphatic deterrence for Indians to not venture into dangerous waters. Solely by affecting such corrections, can the region and the global community be safeguarded from the imminent perils associated with a nuclear war in South Asia?

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