

## Impact of SRBMs on Deterrence Stability in South Asia\*

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### Abstract

*Nuclear weapons play a pivotal role in overall military strategy of Pakistan. The presence of conventional asymmetry between India and Pakistan along with India's Cold Start Doctrine, have urged Pakistan to increase its reliance on nuclear weapons. This nuclear posture has helped Pakistan in achieving sufficient deterrence against India and has restored the strategic stability in the region. However the future of regional politics is highly dependent upon India's disposition and whether it will continue to embark upon integration of its TNW into Cold Start Doctrine, in which case this could stimulate a nuclear engagement with serious consequences for the region*

**Keywords:** NASR, FSD, Deterrence, South Asia, CBMs, Nuclear Weapons, Brasstacks, Kargil Crisis.

### Introduction

The development of surface to surface short range ballistic missile (SRBM) 'NASR' (Hatf IX) by Pakistan to counter India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) has generated intense debate on the role of these weapons on South Asian strategic stability. The 'NASR' SRBM missile system that could also be categorized as a Tactical Nuclear Weapon (TNW), is now part of Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD)<sup>1</sup> nuclear posture, but is being misconstrued by some as a 'quantitative' shift from Pakistan's declared policy of Credible Minimum Deterrence. This understanding that is mainly based on the only available literature from the Cold War period, therefore, needs to be contextualized in the South Asian strategic environment, as there are significant differences and some similarities at the conceptual level and while operationalizing nuclear deterrence in the regional context.

This paper aims to briefly revisit the concept of deterrence and its

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<sup>1</sup> ISPR Press Release of 5th September 2013. Available at <[http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press\\_release&id=2361](http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=2361)>

applicability in the South Asian region, keeping in view the experience of past military crises between India and Pakistan during the pre and the post nuclearization periods. The paper then addresses the rationale behind Pakistan's decision to introduce SRBMs and the FSD and its role in restoring strategic stability in the region.

### **Deterrence and South Asia**

The South Asian security environment has some distinct characteristics that differentiate its evolution of strategic thought from the Cold War period. Nevertheless, the nature of nuclear weapons and their potential to influence security policies of possessor states are intrinsically similar that helps in narrowing the gap in strategic thinking of all nuclear weapon states. If Brodie's statement made soon after the first nuclear test in 1945: "The chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them"<sup>2</sup> - remained relevant for the Cold War period; it remains applicable in the South Asian context, even after seven decades of nuclear learning process.

Based on this understanding of nuclear weapons and its deterrence impact, Collin Gray had identified four major differences between the pre and post nuclearized inter-state relations.<sup>3</sup> First, no nuclear-weapon state (NWS) or a non-nuclear-weapon state (NNWS) would attempt a military campaign against a nuclear power to achieve total victory; Second, no NWS or NNWS would dare to press a military campaign against a close ally of a NWS to achieve total victory; Third, due to high cost of nuclear war any military campaign against a NWS would be conducted with extreme caution; and finally, NWS do not go to war with each other due to the fear of unlimited implications.

This largely explains the role of nuclear weapons, which is not only to prevent the use of nuclear weapons against each other by the NWS, but the imperative has been to prevent all wars,<sup>4</sup> not just a nuclear war. The absence of war between nuclear armed adversaries leading to strategic stability has been defined by Podvig as: "[S]tate of affairs in

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maildo (eds.), *"Strategic Studies: A Reader"*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.181.

<sup>3</sup> Colin S. Gray, *"Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice"*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Quinlan, *"Thinking About Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects"*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.21.

which countries are confident that their adversaries would not be able to undermine their nuclear deterrence capability.”<sup>5</sup>

As there are no tools to measure how much or what strategies would be sufficient to maintain stability, or the requisite 'balance of power',<sup>6</sup> strategic stability therefore largely remains an abstract concept and cannot be quantified in tangible terms. This is more important in South Asia where Pakistan with conventional disadvantage is seen reacting to emerging challenges and uses its nuclear capability to deter India's conventional as well as nuclear military doctrines.

Some scholars argue that nuclear deterrence is essentially a coercive strategy, as it is intended to persuade the adversary that; 'it must not act for fear of consequences.'<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, if the nuclear capability is intended at preventing a conflict that could possibly escalate to a nuclear exchange – would nuclear deterrence still be categorized as a coercive strategy? This may not necessarily be true, especially if both adversaries are nuclear weapon states and there is a likelihood of an escalation.

Another misnomer about the nuclear weapons is that these are intended only for the purpose of deterrence and not for actual use. If one precludes the possibility of a nuclear use in a deterrence equation - will deterrence remain effective, especially if one of the parties decides to call the bluff and attempts to explore space for a conventional war under a nuclear environment? Quinlan has therefore aptly described the role of nuclear weapons as: no matter how remote we judge the possibility of a nuclear use, these weapons deter only by the possibility of their use and by no other route; and “a nuclear state is a state that no one can afford to make desperate.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pavel Podvig, “The Myth of Strategic Stability”, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 31 October 2012.

<sup>6</sup> According to explanation provided by Waltz about Balance of Power theory, states are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination. For more details see Kenneth Waltz, “*Theories of International Politics*”, (Boston: Mc Graw Hill, 1979), pp. 116-118.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Freedman, “*Deterrence*”, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.26.

<sup>8</sup> Quinlan, p.30.

## **Role of Nuclear Weapons in India-Pakistan Past Crises**

The 1986-87 military mobilization by India in the form of Exercise Brasstacks<sup>9</sup> was the first military crisis that had overtones of a nuclear signalling. India had already tested its nuclear weapons in 1974 and Pakistan is believed to have conducted cold tests by the mid-80s. Once India mobilized its forces possibly to launch a full-fledged military operation, it is believed that Pakistan communicated its readiness to consider the possibility of a nuclear use. How real was the threat, and what kind of nuclear weapons Pakistan had at the time - is a subject that merit deeper analysis. Nevertheless, since India did not cross the international border despite having relative conventional and nuclear edge, one could possibly conclude that by conveying the nuclear threat, Pakistan may have used its nascent nuclear capability effectively to deter India.

The 'Brasstacks' crisis brought important lessons for both India and Pakistan. For Pakistan nuclear weapons became a strategic equalizer and an effective tool to deter a conventionally strong adversary; while India realized that full-fledged conventional war with Pakistan is no more possible without risking a nuclear exchange.

### **1999 Kargil Crisis**

The Kargil conflict was the first military crisis after the overt nuclearization of South Asia. Some believe that nuclear weapons played significant role but largely through threat and bluster.<sup>10</sup> Despite strong statements threatening each other with nuclear weapons the actual capabilities and the resolve on both sides remained doubtful. India's former Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh believed that; "nuclear angle to this [Kargil] conflict simply did not exist."<sup>11</sup> It was also later corroborated by the Indian government's Kargil Review Committee Report, which was silent regarding any nuclear threats

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<sup>9</sup> For detail study of the crisis and the role of nuclear weapons, see P.R. Chari, Pervez Iqbal Cheema and Stephen P. Cohen, *"Four Crises And A Peace Process: American Engagement in South Asia"*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2007), p.119

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jaswant Singh, *"A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India"*, (New Delhi: Rupa, 2006), p.227

<sup>12</sup> Kargil Review Committee Report, in Chari, p.139.

being operative during the hostilities from both the sides despite devoting an entire chapter to the nuclear background to this crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, most of the reports of missile mobilization and mating of warheads suggesting the possibility of a nuclear use by Pakistan emanated from the Western sources and were based on intelligence leaks from within the US Administration. However, there is no evidence to validate these claims. Former President Pervez Musharraf, who was also the Army Chief at the time termed the accusation of a possible nuclear use by Pakistan as 'preposterous'. According to him, Pakistan's nuclear capability in 1999 was not yet fully operational,<sup>13</sup> possibly due to absence of delivery systems.

Some of the lessons that could be drawn from the first nuclear crisis in the post 1998 period are: deterrence was effective without actually operationalizing the nuclear command structures; second, even if the Kargil crisis had a nuclear dimension, it remained limited mostly to war-gaming of nuclear deterrence without operationally deploying nuclear assets on both sides; third, both sides demonstrated a degree of restraint - India by not crossing the Line of Control (LoC) and Pakistan by not launching air operations; and lastly, Kargil conflict revealed the limits of nuclear deterrence to demarcate each sides red-lines, if not deter, war between the two adversaries.<sup>14</sup>

### **2001 - 2002 Crisis**

If Kargil crisis was a triggering event for contextualizing deterrence in South Asia; the 2001-02 crisis was the first practical manifestation of nuclear deterrence between two new nuclear-armed neighbours. India, despite significant domestic and institutional pressures struggled for over eight months to get out of 'strategic paralysis' but was deterred from crossing the Line of Control (LoC). On the other hand, Pakistan being a relatively weaker state was able to communicate the credibility of its deterrent potential quite effectively and prevented India from initiating hostilities.

Unlike the Kargil crisis in 1999, nuclear war rhetoric during the 2001-02 crisis was more evident. Within days nuclear brinkmanship led both sides issuing strong statements asserting the credibility of

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<sup>13</sup> Former President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf, *"In the Line of Fire"*, (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 97-98

<sup>14</sup> Chari, p.140.

their respective military postures. India and Pakistan were both engaged in a series of missile tests and deployed their nuclear forces as part of general mobilization, to signal their resolve. Some of the Indian scholars were of the view that India may have lost its nerves and confidence in its conventional capability to launch military offensive against Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

India's military mobilization of 2001-02 in the garb of 'Operation Parakaram' failed to achieve its military objectives and brought important lessons for the Indian military planners. First, an all-out war with Pakistan is not possible without risking nuclear retribution. Second, full military mobilization for achieving limited political objectives is neither feasible nor economical and would be difficult to justify. Third, to meet similar challenges in the future, India needed to reconfigure its force structure, which should have quick reaction time and the capability to achieve its intended objectives without crossing Pakistan's perceived nuclear threshold. This led India to conceive new war fighting doctrine in the form of Cold Start.

### **Cold Start Doctrine (CSD)**

Since the early 1980s Sundarji doctrine had been the guiding principle for India's development and employment strategy. According to this doctrine the bulk of Indian military formations were employed along the Western border to defend possible military incursion from the Pakistani side. These formations were mostly defensive in nature and were mandated to hold ground and allow sufficient time for the offensive strike corps that were located in central parts of India to mobilize and launch a counter-attack. To operationalize this military strategy, the Indian Air Force was required to enable air superiority, if not air supremacy to limit or prevent attrition of own ground forces.<sup>16</sup>

This strategy had inherent limitation. The slow mobilization time of the Indian offensive formations from the centre to the Western border afforded Pakistan sufficient time for defensive measures due to less geographical depth thus eliminating the element of surprise that is crucial for achieving quick gains in a conventional military conflict.

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<sup>15</sup> Kanti Bajpai, Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur ed., "Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb", (London: Routledge, 2009), p.171.

<sup>16</sup> Walter C. Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Waters?: The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine", *International Security*, Vol.32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08), p.160.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.162-63.

In order to overcome this impediment, the Indian Army Chief in April 2004, unveiled the new Cold Start Doctrine (CSD).<sup>17</sup> The objective was to develop a capability to launch a conventional military operation in the shortest possible time to achieve limited objectives without disturbing Pakistan's nuclear threshold. By keeping war objectives limited in a time compressed environment, Indian military planners had hoped to deny Islamabad the justification to respond through its strategic nuclear capability against the Indian cities.

India's CSD posited a new challenge for Pakistan, as it was intended to exploit perceived gap at the operational and tactical levels by launching limited military incursions across international border. The CSD envisaged reorganizing strike corps into at least eight smaller division-sized Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) that combined mechanized infantry, artillery, and armour on the pattern of the Soviet Union's operational manoeuvre groups.<sup>18</sup> These IBG's would mobilize swiftly to make ingress into the Pakistani territory 50-80 km deep within a short time period of 72-96 hours.

If the challenge posed by the CSD left unaddressed, it could have challenged the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent and encouraged India to explore the possibility of a limited war under a nuclear overhang and assert its regional hegemony.

### **Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence**

To counter India's new war fighting doctrine, Pakistan introduced its SRBM labelled as 'NASR', which is a 'qualitative response' with a 'strategic' objective of deterring India from launching military offensive in the form of CSD. By developing these weapon systems, Pakistan aims to enhance the credibility of its deterrence at the operational and tactical levels, which could possibly be described as a 'Strategy of Assured Deterrence' – to cover full spectrum of threats, and has therefore been labelled as Full Spectrum Deterrence posture.

Earlier statements attributed to Pakistani nuclear planners indicate that there existed inherent flexibility and ambiguity in the nuclear doctrine to cater for various contingencies. In a statement attributed to Lt Gen (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, the former Head of Strategic Plans Division, it was stated that nuclear weapons would be used only

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<sup>18</sup> Y.I. Patel, "Dig Vijay to Divya Astra: A Paradigm Shift in the Indian Army's Doctrine," Bharat Rakshak Monitor, Vol. 6, No. 6 (May-July 2004), <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE6-6/patel.html>.

“if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake.” However, while describing the range of contingencies, he had stated that nuclear weapons are aimed solely to deter India. In case deterrence fails, these will be used if; India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of territory (space threshold); India destroys a large part either of its land or air forces (military threshold); India proceeds towards economic strangulation of Pakistan (economic threshold); and finally, if India pushes Pakistan into political destabilization or creates a large scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilization).<sup>19</sup>

These contingencies outlined by Gen Kidwai as early as 2001 indicate that while massive retaliation remained an option to deter India's all-out conventional attack, however, “there are options available in the nuclear response.”<sup>20</sup> The introduction of short range surface to surface multi tube ballistic missile HATF IX (NASR), with a range of 60 km that can carry a warhead of appropriate yield and accuracy, with shoot and scoot attributes could thus be viewed as part of options that Pakistan continues to develop in response to evolving threats from India. Pakistan's 'NASR' missile system could therefore be seen as an effort to “consolidate Pakistan's strategic deterrence capability at all levels of the threat spectrum.”<sup>21</sup>

NASR missile system due to its short range could also be termed as a battlefield missile system for tactical level operations. In addition to this, Pakistan had earlier declared that its other short-range missile system HATF II (Abdali), “provides Pakistan with an operational level capability.”<sup>22</sup> Sources conversant with South Asian military lexicon argue that in the regional context, tactical level forces would constitute India's mechanized/ armoured brigades and infantry divisions; the operational level could include mechanized/ armoured divisions, strike corps and corps plus size forces; and strategic level forces could comprise of two or more strike corps.

Since Pakistan had effective deterrence capability at the strategic level, the development of SRBMs helped to plug the 'perceived' gaps at the tactical and operational levels - to cover the full spectrum of threats. The resultant 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' nuclear posture

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<sup>19</sup> Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan: A Concise Report of a Visit by Landau Network – *Centro Volta*, available at <http://www.pugwash.org/september11/pakistaan-nuclear.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> ISPR Press Release, available at [http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?0=t-press\\_release=1721](http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?0=t-press_release=1721).

<sup>22</sup> ISPR Press Release, available at [http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?0=t-press\\_release&id=1689](http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?0=t-press_release&id=1689)



therefore aims to consolidate threat responses at different tiers by developing options at the tactical level (against limited incursions); operational level (to deter a sizeable military offensive); and strategic (to prevent an all-out war). These capabilities, once integrated into overall military strategy are bound to ease the pressure at the strategic level and would thus enhance the 'credibility' of overall nuclear deterrence posture.

Some of the Western scholars had earlier predicted this shift in Pakistani thinking due to the nature of evolving threat from its conventionally stronger adversary. According to Cohen (2009), "unclassified Pakistani military publications do include discussions of scenarios in which Islamabad orders tactical nuclear weapons to be used as warning shots, nuclear tests to be used as a signal of resolve, or a single weapon to be used against invading Indian armoured divisions."<sup>23</sup>

This conclusion was nevertheless based on comparison of US nuclear posture during its early period but may have relevance in the South Asian context. However, there is one fundamental difference in the US and Pakistani thinking. While US made its transition from one nuclear use doctrine to the other mainly to maintain its edge over the Soviet Union - both in terms of superior concepts and capability; Pakistan on the other hand, seems to have moved from a strategy of deterring an all-out war to a more flexible response option to address range of threats.

The recent developments and excessive focus on Pakistan's SRBM while disregarding India's introduction of its own version of TNWs in the form of 'Prahaar',<sup>24</sup> is indicative of preconceived conclusions based on little understanding of the regional security environment.

Several Western scholars have raised concerns on the impact of Pakistan's 'NASR' on strategic stability and also issues related to command and control. Though similar concerns are also valid for India's TNWs and its submarine based nuclear missiles that may require pre-delegation of launch authority; nevertheless, these issues merit attention in the context of regional stability.

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Philip Cohen, quoted in Scott Sagan, (eds.), *Inside Nuclear South Asia*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p.235.

<sup>24</sup> India tested its tactical missile Prahaar on 21st July 2011, within three months after Pakistan had tested its NASR tactical missile. According to India's official press release, Prahaar can carry different types of warheads. See <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=73407>

One of the criticisms is that Pakistan's TNWs to deter limited operations (CSD) may lead to instability, as it could lower the nuclear threshold and increase chances of a nuclear war. On the other hand, allowing space for a limited conventional war could be more dangerous in South Asia, as any military conflict between the two nuclear armed neighbours would have the potential to rapidly escalate to a nuclear war. Therefore, war prevention at all levels should be the primary objective between the two South Asian nuclear-capable states that Pakistan hopes to accomplish by integrating its SRBM capability into overall deterrence posture.

Since the purpose of SRBMs appears to deter aggression even at the lowest rung of a military conflict, therefore, range of capabilities offers the decision maker the flexibility of a proportionate response rather than relying solely on the strategic deterrent. For example, in response to a limited military incursion by Indian forces in the form of a Cold Start Doctrine the threat to destroy Delhi or Mumbai could have been incredible and disproportionate. On the other hand, failure to deter India from operationalizing its limited objectives war doctrine would have discredited Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, especially if India decided to expand the conflict to achieve its wider objectives.

Another criticism is related to command and control issues associated with battlefield nuclear weapons, as it may require delegation of authority to lower level field commanders at some point of time during crises. According to an official statement released from the Prime Minister Office, it was emphasized that Pakistan's nuclear missiles would be centrally controlled and monitored by the National Command Authority (NCA) at all times – during peace as well as crisis through its National Command Centre (NCC).<sup>25</sup> The Strategic Command, Control and Support System (SCCSS), which is the integral part of the NCC, provides state-of-art connectivity of country-wide strategic assets, and is designed to facilitate decision making centrally at the NCC. Apparently, such a system precludes the necessity to pre-delegate the launch authority for any nuclear capable missile, including the SRBM.

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<sup>25</sup> Prime Minister Visits National Command Center, Prime Minister Office Press Release, 4th October 2013. Available at [http://www.pmo.gov.pk/press\\_release\\_details.php?pr\\_id=160](http://www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=160).

## Conclusion

The growing conventional military imbalance between Pakistan and India, and latter's attempt to challenge the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent by exploring space for a limited war in the form of a Cold Start Doctrine may have forced Pakistan to increase its reliance on the nuclear weapons. Nuclear Weapons therefore now play pivotal role in Pakistan's overall military strategy.

Periodic statements emanating from the platform of Pakistan's NCA suggest that Pakistan's FSD is not a 'quantitative' shift, but a 'qualitative' response to the emerging challenges, and remains in line with the concept of Credible Minimum Deterrence nuclear posture. While 'NASR' may be categorized as a TNW, but the primary objective of these SRBMs remains strategic - to prevent India from initiating hostilities even at the lower spectrum of a military conflict, and by no means these weapon systems could be termed for nuclear war fighting.

Pakistan's deterrence capability, including the SRBMs, has helped Pakistan to restore the strategic stability in the region. However, if India decides to integrate its own version of TNW *Prahaar*, into its CSD as a tit for tat response,<sup>26</sup> this could lead to nuclear war fighting with serious consequences for the region.

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<sup>26</sup> Ali Ahmed, 'A Nuclear Retaliation Alternative', *IDS Comment*, 3 Oct 2011. Available at <http://www.idsa.in>