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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mishra, S. (2017). Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold: Not as Low as Perceived. *IndraStra Global*, 6, 1-4. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-52086-9>

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FEATURED | Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold: Not as Low as Perceived

indrastra.com/2017/06/FEATURED-Pakistan-s-Nuclear-Threshold-Not-as-Low-as-Perceived-003-06-2017-0018.html

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At slightest pretext, Pakistan threatens to use nuclear weapons against anyone it feels insecure, and more so against India.[1] The introduction of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) into its inventory has been portrayed to have sufficiently lowered its nuclear threshold. Rawalpindi appears to believe that there is no space for conventional war, and it can use nuclear weapons on the battlefield if New Delhi crosses its *'redlines'* without triggering a *'massive'* nuclear retaliation. On the contrary, New Delhi appears to believe that a limited conventional war can be fought and won below Pakistan's nuclear threshold.

Almost two decades have been passed since the 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan during which existence of *"nuclear weapons may have limited the risks of war, but they do not inhibit either side from engaging in low-level conflicts."*[2] The logic of deterrence no doubt holds in South Asia, but the same does not obviate limited conventional conflicts. The Kargil war in 1999, Operation Parakram in 2001-02, and the surgical strike by India in 2016 represent rather a combination of Pakistani boldness and Indian calibrated action that have surprised proponents of the *'stability-instability paradox'*. It *"remains unclear and will always remain so"* as to *"how deep into Pakistan would be deep enough for India to obtain its objectives; and how deep would be too much for Pakistan."*[3] Therefore, the assumption that Pakistani nuclear threshold is 'low' is arbitrary, unrealistic, and unfashionable now. This study vilifies the assumption that Pakistani nuclear threshold is abysmally low.

Imagined Nuclear Threshold

Though the exact contours of Pakistan's nuclear threshold is unclear, Khalid Kidwai, the former head of Strategic Planning Division (SPD), in 2001 delineated four generic *"redlines"*: spatial threshold (loss of large parts of territory), military threshold (destruction of large parts of land or air forces), economic threshold (economic strangulation), and political threshold (political destabilization or large scale internal subversion). Understandably these four redlines reinforce deterrence against an enemy who threatens Pakistan's *'survival'*. In 2002 then-President Pervez Musharraf stated that *"nuclear weapons are aimed solely at India,"* and would only be used if *"the very existence of Pakistan as a state"* was at stake.[4] Indeed, no Indian leader has considered threatening the survival of Pakistan.

However, pronouncements by Pakistani political and military leaders on various occasions to use nuclear weapons bring one the impression that Pakistan showcases a maximalist threshold posture even though it is aware of the illogic of climbing on the escalation ladder, thus losing its credibility. A day before the terrorist attack in Uri, Pakistan Defence Minister reportedly said that *"We are always pressurized time and again ... that we have more tactical weapons than we need. If anyone steps on our soil and if someone's designs are a threat to our security, we will not hesitate to use those weapons for our defense."*[5] Expanding the threat to use nuclear weapons *"beyond simply ensuring national survival is problematic."*[6] The nuclear threshold has to be higher than that for it to have any meaning. The cross-LoC strike by India in September 2016 has indeed exposed the basic contradiction between the logic of Pakistan's nuclear threats and the illogic of actually carrying out such threats.

The threat of use of TNWs by Pakistan did not deter India from limited conventional actions to punish Pakistan. The surgical strike by India has challenged the perceived 'low nuclear threshold' and *"disgraced Pakistan's nuclear red lines and in all likelihood, pushed them back a bit."*[7] It tore apart the escalation theory by Pakistan and proved Pakistan's nuclear sabre rattling bluff. C. Raja Mohan rightly observes that there is a growing belief in New Delhi that *"the time has come to call Pakistan's nuclear bluff. If it does not, India places itself in permanent vulnerability to cross-border terrorism from Pakistan."*

TNWs and Nuclear Threshold

Possession of TNWs by Pakistan is viewed to have significantly lowered nuclear threshold in South Asia. But introspection on the Pakistani calculation behind TNWs would reveal that *"Pakistan is not seeking to exploit the military utility of TNWs"*; rather it aims *"to reclaim the space that India maintains exists for a conventional war even in the presence of nuclear weapons."* If one extrapolates the Cold War experience to the South Asian environment, it would reveal that the motivation behind Pakistan's pursuit of TNWs against the conventionally superior India stems from NATO's perceived military inferiority against the Soviet Union. But Pakistan overlooks the reasons for which the U.S. withdrew most of the TNWs from Europe in 1991. Certainly, U.S. goal was to deter any conventional attack by the Soviet Union on Western Europe. It also wanted to avoid any escalation of the conflict to a full fledged nuclear war between them. But the TNWs were *"proved to be useless militarily as nuclear use at the tactical level would lead to a strategic response and an uncontrollable escalation. Pakistan, however, has embraced this discarded strategy..."* [10]

The prevailing myth in Pakistan is that the "actions at the tactical or operational level have no strategic implications. Pakistan considers the TNW is a deterrent at best, and a war termination weapons at worst. When it comes to actual use of TNWs, as argued by Rajesh Basrur, Pakistan *"will be self-deterred. ... The nuclear detonations that occur – even if limited – will be either within Pakistan's territory or so close to it that the fallout will likely affect its own population."*[11] As both India and Pakistan are introducing dual-use delivery vectors that *"make it difficult to discriminate between incoming nuclear and conventional attacks"*. [12]

According to Pakistani Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhary (October 20, 2015), Pakistan is formalizing its plans to use this low-yield or so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons in a potential future conflict with India.[13] But Pakistan has been quite on details on its redlines and parameters for use of TNWs. General Asad Durrani, former DG ISI Pakistan, said in 2003 that Pakistan does not *"identify those core interests that, if threatened, could trigger a nuclear retort. These are elements of operational planning and stating them could betray a country's conventional limits."*[14] Given the opaqueness, Pakistan's nuclear threshold is subject to India's interpretation; undeterred by the TNWs India will decide on its own terms the level of Pakistani threshold – would be proportionate to India's concerns and grievances against Pakistani misadventure.

For example, a deep penetration by India into the barren desert area of Pakistan, in response to Pakistani-backed terrorist infiltration, is unlikely to breach its nuclear threshold. Air strikes against the terrorist infrastructure in POK not likely to evoke nuclear response either. Pakistan will not resort to nuclear weapons until the Indian defense forces advance well into PoK or threaten Pakistan side of Punjab. Therefore, fixing of nuclear threshold in South Asia would largely depend on the evolving circumstances, therefore will remain dynamic.

Also, one need to understand what factors lower the nuclear threshold in South Asia. Is it the miniaturization of nuclear warheads and short-range nuclear-capable vectors, or constant harping by Pakistan on the nuclear conflict scare? As India does not differentiate between 'strategic' and 'tactical' weapons, lowering of threshold does not bring any qualitative change.

Takeaways

Irrespective of Pakistani assertion of the low nuclear threshold, India will respond with conventional military force, may be limited

in scope, to any Pakistani misadventure. Limited conventional conflict remains a viable option in South Asia under the nuclear overhang. India would continue with the straightforward nuclear posture of 'deterrence by punishment', where 'strategic' or 'tactical' is irrelevant. Therefore, TNWs have little utility in South Asian context; especially no major advantages seem to accrue from them by Pakistan. The hardest lesson for Pakistan is that its "nuclear romanticism"[15] based on the idea that NTWs can solve its conventional military imbalance vis-a-vis India only guarantees larger nuclear exchange. [16]

Interestingly, 'denial' of occurrence of an offensive act by the enemy can be an effective strategy to sideline the pressure or compulsion to respond. Pakistan's denial of the surgical strike by India cross-LoC has effectively saved its face from humiliation. This provides scope and room for India to unleash further such strikes if situation warrants for the fact that this does not breach Pakistani nuclear threshold. In fact, the 1999 Kargil war, the 2001-02 crisis, and the surgical strike "can be seen as New Delhi's attempt to test Pakistan's nuclear threshold." [17]

More importantly, Pakistan though has reserved the first-use of nuclear weapons option, it proclaims to use them as "the last resort...if Pakistan is threatened with extinction." [18] If this is to be believed, Pakistan will first mobilize and exhaust all its conventional forces at its disposal. Though not comparable to India's, Pakistan has piled up a sizable conventional force and the limits of its conventional force must not be underestimated. Therefore, the perception of 'low nuclear threshold' must be viewed through the prism of "last resort" and limits of its conventional force.

Lastly, the role of international community in Indo-Pak conflict has been exaggerated. In fact, Pakistan assumes that in the case of a war, the international community will immediately intervene and stop India from continuing its conventional campaign or undertaking nuclear retaliation. With the ascendance of India's global clout along with its restraint behavior, New Delhi's response to Pakistani misadventures would not ring strong alarm bells, unlike before.

All these do not necessarily suggest India treat nuclear issues involving Pakistan carelessly. Pakistan is a risk-acceptant state capable of "irrational" strategic surprises. But India will "demonstrate to Pakistan that exaggerated nuclear bluff will no longer go unchallenged." [19] Since nuclear weapons are here to stay, Indian forces have to be prepared to operate in a radioactive environment that may be forced upon them by Pakistani actions. Reportedly India is gearing for underground control rooms, NBC Protection Suits for its Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC), radiation proof shelters, monitoring technology, etc. which needs to be expedited. [20]

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Cite this Article:

Mishra, S. "FEATURED | Pakistan's Nuclear Threshold: Not as Low as Perceived", IndraStra Global Vol. No: 003, Issue No: 06 (2017), 0018, <http://www.indrastra.com/2017/06/FEATURED-Pakistan-s-Nuclear-Threshold-Not-as-Low-as-Perceived-003-06-2017-0018.html> | ISSN 2381-3652



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