

STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATIONS: INDIA'S PURSUIT OF COUNTERFORCE TARGETING AND REGIONAL STABILITY

Mubeen Ashraf and Syed Saif ul Haq *

Abstract

In the intricate web of South Asia's security dynamics, India and Pakistan's relationship holds the key to equilibrium. Geographical proximity demands swift responses, prompting India's strategic shift towards Counterforce targeting. Official declarations and military posturing attest to India's resolute commitment to recalibrate its deterrence doctrine. This study critically examines the origins of India's Counterforce targeting strategy, drawing from existing literature and employing theoretical frameworks, including posture optimization, escalation ladder, superiority-brinkmanship, mathematical game theory, rational choice theory, and nuclear deterrence. These models collectively contribute to understanding the implications of India's pursuit of nuclear superiority for coercive diplomacy with Pakistan. Beyond enriching the understanding of South Asia's security, this research unravels the interplay between evolving nuclear strategies, the fluid dynamics of deterrence, and nuanced geopolitical ambitions. By deciphering India's counterforce targeting approach, this study fosters a nuanced discourse on South Asian strategic stability, offering insight into the pivotal role of nuclear deterrence in shaping the region.

Keywords: Nuclear Deterrence, Cold War Era, Strategic Stability, Counterforce Targeting, Coercive Diplomacy, Credible Minimum Deterrence.

Introduction

Nuclear deterrence as a tool and strategy gained preeminence during the Cold War era. At that time, it was hailed as the most dominant and efficacious shade of nuclear strategy for maintaining the status quo. Nuclear deterrence is based on the threat of massive retaliation; the survivability of your nuclear assets after absorbing the adversary's first strike.¹ The survivability of nuclear arsenal remains central to the functioning of nuclear deterrence. The techniques employed for ensuring the survivability of nuclear retaliatory capabilities include hardening, concealment and dispersion. India acquired nuclear capability to effectively counter Chinese and Pakistani threats. As per the dictums of the officially stated doctrine, India possesses a Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) and adheres to the policy of No First Use

*Mubeen Ashraf is a Researcher at Global Foundation for Cyber Studies and Research, Washington DC, USA, and Visiting Lecturer. Syed Saif ul Haq is pursuing his MPhil degree in Defence and Strategic Studies from Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad and also holds certifications from Stimson Centre and UNODA. The author(s) can be reached at mubeen.0727@gmail.com.

(NFU). India maintains a posture of assured retaliation in case of a nuclear attack on the Indian Territory or Indian Forces anywhere.

A Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) is a kind of deterrence in which the opted force posture aims to engage the adversary's countervalue targets in a retaliatory strike. Countervalue targets are the nonmilitary soft targets, most likely densely populated cities. Recent technological acquisitions and statements by the Indian strategic community have hinted at the shift towards counterforce targeting. Counterforce targeting is aimed at engaging the hard military targets. Here a question arises in the minds that why India wants to denounce NFU and shift towards counterforce targeting, especially in a preemptive mode? Denouncing NFU publicly would be denting India's image globally, as through the acts of delicate diplomacy India has projected itself as a responsible and cautious nuclear actor aiming to avoid nuclear warfighting at all costs. A dispassionate analysis points out that the disturbance at the sub-conventional level in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) is the bone of contention between India and Pakistan. India blames Pakistan for supporting proscribed outfits from across the borders, without sharing effective and credible intelligence. With this backdrop, India aims to launch limited conventional punitive strikes inside the Pakistani territory. However, fielding of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan has restricted the Indian space of action. Nuclear counterforce preemption is being projected as a proactive strategy overcoming Indian strategic paralysis and preserving the space of action. In this study, an endeavour has been made to (a) explain the Indian shift to counterforce preemption with the help of a theory, (b) analyze the statements of Indian statesmen to understand their preview about counterforce preemption, (c) what are the latest technological acquisitions by India? (d) what are the consequences of Indian counterforce preemption on the deterrence stability in South Asia?

Defining Strategic Stability

Strategic Stability as a concept was presented during the Cold War to chalk out a workable solution for a competitive coexistence between the USA and USSR. The efficacy of this concept rested on the hypothesis that two states possessed the ability to launch a retaliatory strike after absorbing a disarming first strike, the existence of Assured Second Strike Capability (ASSC). During the last leg of the Cold War, Glenn Kent and David Thaler introduced a concept of first-strike stability. In this situation, the two states had no operational advantage to launch a disarming first strike due to the fear of massive retaliation.²

James M's action has examined three possible connotations in which strategic stability could be understood.³ Firstly, in the narrowest sense strategic stability could be understood as a function of crisis stability and arms race stability. Secondly, it is manifested by the absence of armed conflict between the two adversaries. Lastly, it is the existence of the peaceful and harmonious relations between the two adversaries.

Zenel Garcia contends that the orthodox bilateral model of nuclear deterrence that operated during the Cold War is being challenged in the second nuclear age due to nuclear triads, commingling of conventional and nuclear weapon systems and incorporation of artificial intelligence into various weapon systems.⁴

Theoretical Explanations

As per the understanding of a US presidential administration, nuclear posture aims to explain the logic of various nuclear policies, doctrinal choices and the required forces. Nuclear posture is tailored to fit to promote stable deterrent relationships with a focus on credibility. In case, deterrence fails, nuclear posture should have less escalatory provisions; on the flip side, one must survive the adversary's escalation. Element of proportionality in the case of nuclear warfighting must be practiced.

After the overt nuclear testing by India in 1998, Ashley J. Telis quoted Indian nuclear posture as somewhat between a recessed deterrent and a ready arsenal. However, in the evolving strategic environment, India is aspiring to maintain a ready-to-use nuclear arsenal. The *posture optimization* theory proposed by Vipin Narang is a decent starting point to understand the structural and unit level variables playing a significant role in the choice of a particular nuclear posture by the regional countries.⁵ Nuclear postures opted by regional countries and their subsequent typologies are distinctive from those chosen by superpowers. Superpowers like USA and Russia had an immense resource pool and the force posture obtained by them is untenable for the regional countries having scanty material bases. Provisions of the theory assert that regional countries will choose a posture that is tailored fit for their security environment and comprehensively deters a variety of threats. Structural variables may include the state's relative power position, alignment with a third party and the security environment itself. At the unit level, the factors include the nature of civil-military relations and the resources at the disposal.

Structural variables for the choice of a ready-to-use nuclear arsenal include expanding economic cum diplomatic clout, Indo-US strategic partnership with a focus on nuclear commerce, the rise of ultra-nationalistic tendencies: Hindutva ideology, and growing Chinese threat. Even though India has not agreed to place its all-nuclear facilities under the comprehensive safeguards proposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), US has advocated its admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). India got the waiver from the NSG for nuclear commerce by US lobbying with the various actors.

The nature of civil-military relations in the context of nuclear decision making is an important unit level variable determining the contours of a nuclear posture. Indian Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) has three tiers: Political Council, Executive Council and Strategic Force Command (SFC). Political Council being the apex body consists of topnotch civilian leadership headed by the Prime Minister. Executive Council has a national security advisor at the top comprised of the Atomic

Energy Commission chief, three service chiefs and the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO). SFC is the third and the last tier of NCA. Rear Admiral Raja Menon has been a critique of the efficacy of NCA in a crisis. In a crisis, the SFC has to collect de-mated nuclear weapons from DRDO and weapon cores from the Atomic Energy Commission and eventually fuse them with the delivery vehicles for the launch. Involvement of various tiers of civilian and military leadership might delay the crisis response, eventually leading to a kill. However, efforts are made to enhance the operational autonomy of SFC with a greater delegation of authority. For effectively launching counterforce targeting preemptively, SFC will have the ready-to-use weapons in the days to come. As of now with the existing institutional and command structure maintaining a hair-trigger posture is not feasible and operationally possible.

As categorized by Vipin Narang, regional countries may opt for the three nuclear postures: catalytic, assured retaliation and asymmetric escalation. Being indicated by the declaratory doctrine and the acquired capabilities, India has a posture of assured retaliation. Defining features of this nuclear posture include the survivability of the nuclear arsenal after absorbing the first strike, centralized and de-mated nuclear weapons, and the absence of fielded tactical nuclear weapons. Within the maintained posture of assured retaliation, there is no provision allowing the execution of preemptive strikes. However, recent assertions by the Indian strategic community in favour of launching a comprehensive first strike, at the prima-facie seem in-coherent with the doctrinal provisions.

Matthew Kroenig has put forward a theory of *superiority-brinkmanship synthesis*.⁶ To understand this theory, one must understand it in a piecemeal approach. Firstly, let's discuss the concept of nuclear superiority and its impact on nuclear deterrence. Nuclear superiority pertains to a power equation in which the balance of power is tilted in one's favour and it has the greater advantage in initiating a nuclear conflict. Brinkmanship theorists like Schelling point that states intentionally escalate the crisis to check the resolve of the adversary. Political games of power contestation are transformed into the nuclear sabre-rattling. Brinkmanship theorists did not take into account the power equation in their calculus and assumed uniform behaviours of escalation. Matthew synthesised these two concepts and presented a novel theory that underscored the significance of nuclear superiority in conducting escalation games.

Indian aspirations to pursue counterforce targeting can be explained with the help of the afore-mentioned theory. Exploiting nuclear advantage to execute coercive diplomacy seems a plausible policy choice for Indian strategists. However, let's take a deep look for understanding the intricacies of the subject matter. Firstly, discussing the tenets of superiority one finds that India is building a range of precision-guided conventional and nuclear delivery systems to engage Pakistan's nuclear assets with greater probability and ease. Diversification of delivery systems and bolstering ISR capabilities in the aerospace nexus are the manifestations of the acquiring nuclear advantage over Pakistan.

Furthermore, India's obsession with a Cold War construct proposed by Herman Kahn: the *escalation ladder*, has complicated its strategic thinking.⁷ With the euphoria of successfully controlling escalation and exploiting the sub-conventional level, India has tried to infiltrate Pakistani air space and waters numerous times. The idea that a Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC) could be initiated and terminated at the lowest possible cost is flawed at its root. About the Balakot episode, the Indian Air Force tried to cross the LOC, and it was intercepted by the PAF fighter jets in no time. In a demonstration of capability and will, PAF fired stand-off weapons while intentionally avoiding the key Indian military installations. Any Indian aggression or ingress at any level of the spectrum is bound to face a proportional and befitting response from the Pakistan Armed Forces, as the opted doctrine of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) has provisions of deterrence at the sub-conventional and the conventional level.⁸ Indian military planners wrongly anticipated that PAF had no contingency planning in place. This wishful thinking led to the arrest of IAF Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who lost his aircraft in a dogfight with the PAF fighters.

Any LIC could not be pursued successfully, as the anticipated military advantage is lost by the operational preparedness and contingency planning of the adversary. Accounting for the above-mentioned fact, pursuing counterforce targeting with the wishful thinking of successfully eliminating Pakistan's nuclear capability will be check-mated by its strategic planning, eventually, the crisis will escalate and may lead to an exchange of strategic nuclear weapons.

Mathew Kroenig's theory of superiority-brinkmanship synthesis advocated those states will tend to diversify its nuclear arsenal to attain superiority vis-a-vis its adversary. Nuclear superiority serves as an aiding tool for effectively executing brinkmanship. As concluded by the discussion above, India is diversifying its nuclear options to attain nuclear advantage over Pakistan, and then execute limited attacks inside Pakistani territory, while operationalizing counterforce targeting in preemption. Counterforce targeting is enabled by the logic of the nuclear superiority (diversification of nuclear options) and then it adds to the confidence of Indian strategists to pursue brinkmanship (initiation of LIC). This theory is tailored fit to explain the Indian ambitions for pursuing counterforce targeting in preemption, as India is aspiring to engage Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons and other hard targets in a comprehensive first strike, and then launch LIC's.

Game theoretic models could also be employed to explain the shift towards the counterforce targeting. Neuman and Morgenstern presented the mathematical model for the game theory. The basic idea was to opt for brilliant strategies in the uncertain and murky situations while relying on the deception.⁹ Deception if channeled properly might yield advantages in strategic decision making in uncertain situations.

Thomas Schelling made salience of *mathematical game theoretic models* for nuclear decision making. In his opinion strategic thinking did not take place in a

vacuum, rather one's strategic choices were heavily reliant on the adversary's moves. In this situation the strategic thinking was aimed at exerting full control over the conflict dynamics, dictating the terms of the conflict. Schelling advocated that one has to make his irrational approach look credible while playing deception to its favour, in other words, one has to shift the onus of decision making to its adversary whether it wants to continue fighting or back off.¹⁰ Schelling stressed framing the threats that leave something to the chance, one has to project that he is not in full control of the situation and anything might happen.

For the sake of the application of *game theory* to the Pakistan-India nuclear decision making, let's look at the game chicken model. This model states that two young boys drive cars towards each other in this situation the first who swerves loses the game. If both swerve, nothing happens at all. If both drivers did not swerve, all was lost. If any of the drivers swerves, while the other does not, the one swerves faces humiliation. The table is shown below:

Table-1: Game Chicken Model in Pakistan and India¹¹

		1. Escalate (B-1)	2. De-escalate (B-2)
Pakistan	1. Escalate (A-1)	A ₁ B ₁ 0 0	A ₁ B ₂ +20 -20
	2. Descalate (A-2)	A ₂ B ₁ -20 +20	A ₂ B ₂ -100 -100

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

As illustrated above, if India escalates and Pakistan does not, India faces humiliation. If both states do not escalate the situation, the conflict does not take place. If both sides escalate the conflict, it's doomsday. Schelling's theory stressed the mutual learning and choice of the best solutions among the worst outcomes, minimax strategy. If operational objectives are designed in a way that passes the equilibrium points, more harm will be pursued than good. One has to minimize the advantages, so that it does not trigger a massive resentment among the adversary planners, and they strike back with the full thrust. Nuclear planners of India must see the decision-making cycle as a non-zero-sum game so that deterrence stability is preserved.

Rational choice theory and *nuclear deterrence* give us another theoretical framework for understanding the pursuits of counterforce targeting, Dictums of this theory state that nuclear planners tend to minimize the expected losses while maximizing gains. For this sake, two methods are pursued i.e. risk-prone and risk-averse. Indian counterforce targeting could be seen as a risk-prone method for minimizing the disadvantages at sub-conventional level. As nuclear decision-making does not happen in a silo, and all the endeavours to maximize the operational and strategic advantages are profoundly impacted by the pre-dispositions and biases of

humans involved in the very process. Instead of above stated inference, Indian planners have subjectively calculated that they can launch successful counterforce preemption and destroy Pakistani nuclear assets, which is not the case.

India has developed a centralized nuclear command and control with fewer instances of delegation of authority to avoid the instances of accidental or inadvertent launch in the fog of war.¹² The theoretical framework projected by Vipin Narang is unable to explain Indian counterforce preemptive targeting in line with the dictums of the assured retaliation posture. Indian strategists and academics envisioned nuclear weapons as a means to deter nuclear attacks, however employment of nuclear weapons for deterring conventional and sub-conventional threats is a new trend in Indian policy circles, and a comprehensive theory is required to explain this policy shift.

While relying on several theoretical frameworks, this study concludes that executing counterforce targeting in preemption is nearly impossible and yields disastrous consequences for the deterrence stability of South Asia.

Public Statements about the Counterforce Targeting

Amid the possible employment and usage of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan, Indian security officials have long tried to reinterpret the officially declared doctrine, to project preemption as a continuation of the professed NFU policy. Shiv Shanker Menon, former National Security Advisor, in his book “Choices” has tried to chalk out a new Indian nuclear strategy that has some elements of preemption embedded in it.¹³ While crafting a discourse allowing a preemptive nuclear strike, Menon points out a grey area; under what circumstances India might use nuclear weapons first? He contends that if a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) has declared that it might use nuclear weapons first in any evolving contingency, and India perceives that threat is immediate and imminent, going for the nuclear first strike may be tactically and strategically advantageous. However, India's nuclear doctrine is silent about it.

Is this doctrinal silence a deliberate attempt to pursue a strategy of strategic ambiguity? A critical examination is required to ascertain that the Indian strategic community believes that the stated doctrine has great flexibility in its provisions to allow any preemptive options. Menon while addressing the Indian National Defence College in 2010 commented on the Indian nuclear strategy as follows, “No first use against non-nuclear weapons states”.¹⁴ This comment further raised questions about the Indian NFU pledge. The idea projected was not a new one; in 2000 Prime Minister Vajpayee hinted that in case of a possible nuclear use by Pakistan, India would not wait like the sitting ducks. Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) published in 1999 states that, “India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike”. This provision creates the space for preemptive action if an adversary is planning to go first.

Since the declaration of the nuclear doctrine, many Indian politicians and military personnel have raised apprehensions over an absolute NFU pledge. Unlike

Menon, many individuals have restrained from bringing preemption in consistency with the NFU pledge, rather advocating explicitly for the revision of it. In 2012, P.R. Chari, a former defence official chaired a nongovernmental task force to convince government officials to reconsider the NFU policy in case of an immediate and impending nuclear attack.¹⁵ Building on the language of DND, the task force tried to define “initiation” as a process that includes mating of different component systems and the deployment of the warheads. The purpose of defining nuclear initiation in such a manner is to develop a rationale for going nuclear first.

Lt. Gen. B.S. Nagal (ret), a former strategic force commander has been an advocate of denouncing NFU and pursuing a strategy of doctrinal ambiguity enabling operational planners to effectively execute first-strike options in scenarios of preemption including launch on warning and launch on launch.¹⁶ He was the first one to question the NFU on the moral grounds. Recently, Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar while responding to a question in a book launch reflected his insights on the NFU policy. He asserted that “A lot of people say India has a no-first-use nuclear policy, but why should I bind myself? I should say I’m a responsible nuclear power, and I will not use it irresponsibly”. Furthermore, he downplayed the authoritative nature of the declaratory doctrine, and it dubbed written strategy as merely a guideline for various situations. He made the point that ambiguity is the central feature of all the strategies.

Vipin Narang has analysed the nuclear strategies of India and Pakistan and asserts that India wants to execute a comprehensive first strike to eliminate Pakistan’s strategic and tactical arsenal, in a bid to secure the space for a conventional action.¹⁷ However, the material capabilities do not support the assertions made by the Indian strategic community. Furthermore, the development of capabilities by India to maintain a credible deterrent against China is allowing it to pursue offensive strategies against Pakistan. The decoupling of the Indian nuclear strategy between China and Pakistan is sponsored by the doctrinal flexibility and the prowess gap vis-a-vis China and Pakistan.

Technological Acquisitions

India has long struggled to establish a credible deterrent against China while developing long range ballistic missiles with greater accuracy and tipped with Multiple Independent Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRV). The focus on credibility against China has rendered minimum obsolete in context to Pakistan, especially threatening to use long range ballistic missiles in a depressed and lofted trajectory for engaging short range Pakistani targets.¹⁸

While discussing about the Indian long-range ballistic missiles, the Agni family tops the list. India has recently test fired Agni-V, Inter Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) having a range of 5400 km. It can effectively engage targets covering the entire Asia including the northernmost parts of China. Indian Strategic Force

Command (SFC) has showcased the launch of Agni-3 in a shorter and lofted trajectory to engage targets within the range of 1500km. This range of 1500km is tailored to fit to engage Pakistani strategic targets. Furthermore, India test fired Agni-P, a couple of months back, having the capability to engage targets within a range of 1000-2000 km.

As reflected by various reports (MIRV) technology has been mated as a payload to various Agni missiles. A statement by V.K. Saraswat Director General Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has reiterated the above assertion in the following words, "Our design activity on the development and production of MIRV is at an advanced stage today. We are designing the MIRVs. We are integrating them with Agni IV and Agni V missiles".¹⁹ In October 2021, SFC conducted the test firing of Agni-V and reportedly incorporated MIRV technology. Employment of MIRV technology improves the survivability of the nuclear arsenal while acting as an effective force multiplier. Nuclear warheads are cheaper to produce as compared to the missiles. Indian policy makers often project that the acquisition of MIRVs is China centric, to retaliate effectively in case of Chinese nuclear first strike. However, observers in Pakistan think that a single missile carrying multiple payloads could destroy several targets, thus making it a potential counterforce first strike weapon.

India is also investing heavily to develop accurate short range ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear payloads to engage hard Pakistani Counterforce targets located near the border. This technological acquisition does not fit in with the doctrine of "minimum deterrence" but rather reflects the nuclear war-fighting planning. Prahaar having a 150 km range and improved accuracy has replaced the Prithvi-I, dual use systems.²⁰ This missile can deliver up to 200 kg of payloads including nuclear ones. Four out of nine corps commands of the Pakistan Army (PA) and two of eleven flying bases of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) are located within 150km of the border. In October 2020, India test fired an advanced version of Shaurya, a land version of the K-15, having a range of 800 km. It reaches hypersonic speed during the last phase of the flight close to the target, thus rendering countermeasures of no use.

Indian nuclear-powered submarine, INS Arihant was commissioned in 2016, being capable of launching ballistic missiles. India has tested and fired two ballistic missiles, K-15 having a range of 750 km, and K-4 having a range of 3500 km from the INS Arihant.²¹ INS Arighat being the sister ship of Arihant will be operationalized next year. Arighat will have the capacity to host a greater number of missiles, as hinted by various sources. DRDO has attempted to test fire K-4 with shorter ranges and altered trajectories to engage Pakistani targets. In late 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that INS Arihant completed its first deterrence patrol following the accident in 2017. Depressed trajectories reduce the flight time thus reducing the response time of the Early Warning Systems (EWS), although it puts pressure on the reentry vehicle. Lofted trajectories are handy when planners intend to engage short range targets with the help of long-range missiles. Usually, nuclear-powered, and ballistic-capable submarines are considered the most secure and reliable option for the

Assured Second-Strike Capability (ASSC), however, Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramanian understands this capability as a counterforce option.

Development of the cruise missile systems is underway jointly sponsored by the DRDO, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and BrahMos Aerospace Limited (BAPL). India is test-firing BrahMos missiles with extended ranges from the Su-30MKI.²² Recently, the range of BrahMos missile was extended to 400 km. This missile is based on the principle of fire and forget, and can be launched from the sea, land and air platforms. BrahMos has a low radar signature and travels at a speed of Mach 2.8, almost three times the speed of the sound.²³ On April 7, 2022, reportedly due to an accidental launch BrahMos landed in Pakistan. Indian authorities sacked the Air Force officials for deviating from the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) resulting in an accidental and inadvertent launch.²⁴ Pakistani officials and security establishment protested against this accidental launch while citing concerns about the unintended escalation. Defence analysts questioned the credibility of Indian Command and Control (C-2). Concerns were projected that the missile launch was not accidental, and it was a deliberate move to actualize counterforce targeting, meanwhile gauging Pakistan's response. Accounting for the geographical proximity and the supersonic speed of the missile, none of the existing missile defences across the globe could have engaged the incoming BrahMos missile due to a shorter flight time. India has also developed Nirbhay: a subsonic cruise missile, capable of precision strikes up to 1000 km.²⁵

As reflected by the technological acquisitions and the subsequent statements by the Indian officials, nascent attempts have been visible to effectively develop doctrinal thinking and required posturing to execute a counterforce targeting. However, a country with a massive population and a thin economic base will surely struggle to invest heavily in developing sound counterforce capabilities: improved Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, supersonic and hypersonic missiles with improved precision, and robust air defence.

Implications on the South Asian Strategic Stability

If India is opting for counterforce, targeting an impartial analysis is required to highlight its shortcomings, hiccups in its operationalization and the negative consequences for the South-Asian strategic stability. Although India has developed space-based platforms, satellites for mapping the hard military targets of Pakistan, the presence of mobile-based launchers and diversification and dispersion of delivery systems will complicate the very process. Accounting for the aforementioned facts, executing a splendid first strike eliminating Pakistan's strategic arsenal seems fallacious and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Pakistan has developed a large number of remote hardened sites including underground facilities that may contain an unknown number of nuclear warheads or launching platforms or maybe none. Accounting for a large number of dispersed sites,

India has to commit a good number of nuclear weapons to engage hardened targets separately. If India does not have effective and accurate information about the empty sites, it may exhaust its nuclear arsenal lending advantage to Pakistan, which may retaliate with full potential in any such contingency. Furthermore, Pakistan is going for the sea-based delivery systems.²⁶ Pakistan has test fired Babur-3, Sea Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) and completed its nuclear triad. India is investing and developing its capabilities for the Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), although detection of the submarines is an operationally arduous task. In response to the possible acquisition of ballistic missile defences (BMD), S-400 by India, Pakistan has test fired Ababeel Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) which can carry MIRVs and having the potential to penetrate the BMD.

Crisis dynamics between India and Pakistan have the fears of intended and unintended escalation embedded in it. Indian propensity for launching limited military action inside Pakistani territory under the nuclear umbrella is escalatory in itself, accounting for the retaliatory nuclear first use by Pakistan. Any action taken at the sub-conventional or the conventional level will not remain there. Knowing the fact that India is about to launch a comprehensive first strike, Pakistan will fire its nuclear arsenal first to avoid the "use it or lose it" dilemma. It cannot wait like sitting ducks and cede the nuclear as well as conventional initiative to India. Vice versa India will not allow Pakistan to go first for minimizing its disarming potential vis-a-vis Pakistan. Although, as reflected by the statements of Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, Pakistan has no intentions of engaging Indian hard targets in a preemptive strike.²⁷ India's choice of counterforce targeting is instilling first strike instability in South Asia.

Keeping in view the Indian conventional and nuclear strategy, let's take a look at future contingencies. As per the stated conventional strategy, if India launches a limited air strike or a ground intrusion inside Pakistani territory, Pakistan is likely to go nuclear first after a certain threshold is crossed. After the retaliatory nuclear first use by Pakistan, will India go for limited and proportional nuclear use or launch a comprehensive disarming strike? As stated by the dictums of rationality, launching a limited response would surely cede nuclear advantage to Pakistan, as with the remaining nuclear arsenal, it can engage and destroy a good number of Indian hard or soft targets. If India chose to launch a comprehensive strike, what would be the response of Pakistan? Knowing the fact by the cold calculations that after the retaliatory nuclear first use, India is likely to hit us back with full potential, Pakistan will go nuclear first in a comprehensive manner. Thus, any limited conventional action taken by India will escalate to higher levels for sure.

Indian shift towards counterforce targeting is sponsoring an unending arms race in South Asia.²⁸ To make its nuclear arsenal immune to a disarming strike, Pakistan will be compelled to diversify and modernize its delivery systems. Meanwhile, India will build offensive and defensive nuclear capabilities to actualize its counterforce ambitions. This tit-for-tat reaction cycle will never stop, and nuclear arsenals will likely be expanded. Building on the Cold War analogy, Indian planners

are keen to engage Pakistan in a perpetual arms race. Economic constraints will restrain Pakistan to allocate sufficient resources for the modernization of its nuclear arsenal. India wants to hit this fault line. With the relatively stable economic base, India wants to attain nuclear superiority and create a security environment that leaves no other option to Pakistan, than to modernize its arsenal at the expense of financial drainage. However, Pakistan has developed sufficient and efficient infrastructure to reduce the cost of maintaining the survivable nuclear deterrent. Military planners and engineers have assessed the capability gaps and advocated cost-efficient nuclear forces, lessening the pressure on the national exchequer. Additionally, developing delivery systems indigenously has further reduced the costs.

Conclusion

Marked by a plethora of statements from Indian officials and corresponding technological advancements, India's posture is unmistakably shifting toward preemptive counterforce targeting. While scholars assess that India has not yet achieved comprehensive technological capability for effective counterforce preemption, Pakistan's perception of potential first-strike intentions is heightened by India's official declarations.²⁹ In response, Pakistan is diversifying its nuclear delivery systems and considering preemptive strategies to safeguard its arsenal.

These strategic maneuvers have triggered an enduring arms race within South Asia, casting broader security implications that stretch beyond regional borders. The Balakot incident, stemming from Prime Minister Modi's brinkmanship, exposes the frailty and misconceptions associated with escalation control strategies, illuminating the intricacies of practical crisis management.

In the sphere of policy recommendations, the focal point resides in prioritizing rational decision making over brinkmanship. South Asian leaders must foster open dialogue, reinforce crisis communication mechanisms, and reaffirm their dedication to regional stability. Moreover, advocating for international collaboration becomes paramount to curb an unregulated arms race and uphold global security.

In summation, this study echoes as a call to action for an extensive strategic assessment, cultivating transparency, and nurturing dialogue to avert the peril of conflict escalation kindled by misperceptions. The tranquility of the region pivots on collective determination to navigate a path guided by rationality, adept crisis management, and an unwavering commitment to enduring peace—both regionally and globally. This imperative transcends geographical confines, highlighting the shared duty of nations in preserving not only regional balance but also the sanctity of the global security architecture.

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