



NUCLEAR WEAPONS, LIKE POTATO CHIPS –NO ONE CAN USE JUST ONE!



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The decibel of voices in the nuclear world arguing in favour of possibilities of *use* of nuclear weapons appears to be on the rise in recent times. The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) released in Feb 2018 is only the latest in this regard. President Trump has not only expressed his inclination for just new nuclear weapons, as being outlined in the NPR, but also more ways to use them. No longer are these weapons to be used as 'last resort' amongst US military options (as stated in the last NPR of 2010), but likely to figure prominently to deter large scale conventional threats, cyber attacks or those against space assets. Tailored nuclear response for limited use is the new idea gaining in popularity.

It may be recalled that the Russian military doctrine of 2014 too, owing to worries about its conventional military inferiority, had claimed the right to use nuclear weapons in response to aggression with non-nuclear weapons. This was particularly mentioned to counter US conventional global prompt strike involving the use of long-range, high precision non-nuclear weapons against critical nuclear arsenal or infrastructure. However, Moscow describes its nuclear weapons use as "limited nature of initial nuclear impact... [so] designed not to embitter but to sober the aggressor, making it stop the attack and get down to negotiations". The US too now seems to be subscribing to a similar execution of 'limited' nuclear strikes and the NPR makes a case for suitable nuclear weapons and delivery capabilities.

While the cost of building these new weapon systems is something the US government and the Congress need to worry about, what should preoccupy India is the impact such ideas of limited nuclear strikes would have on its own nuclear-armed adversaries. Though China has not yet announced any change in its nuclear doctrine, its capability build-up is catering for all contingencies. In any case, it has voiced its resort to nuclear retaliation in case of a conventional attack on its nuclear capability. Meanwhile, Pakistan has been projecting the battlefield use of nuclear weapons, arguably

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to deter India's conventional might. Following an approach similar to Russia's 'escalate to de-escalate', Pakistan is only likely to derive further justification for its approach from the recent focus on 'limited' nuclear war with 'small' nuclear weapons.

The questions to ask, however, are how limited is limited with use of nuclear weapons? How can any nation guarantee that its own 'limited' nuclear weapons use would be honoured by the other side with a similar response? It is difficult, if at all possible, to visualise that two even modestly nuclear-armed nations would come to the negotiating table, sobered and not embittered, after a 'proportionate' use of nuclear weapons. In any case, what would be proportionate in such a situation and whose determination would that be, given that the effects of nuclear weapons cannot be constrained in time and space? Would a nation measure proportional damage on the basis of the number of people who vaporise in the first flash of light or the numbers as they die gradually and painfully with the effects of radioactivity? Would it at all be possible for nations that have used nuclear weapons against each other to negotiate without anger and rancour even as their citizens suffer the consequences, which will certainly be in media focus? Can it be business-as-usual after a 'limited nuclear exchange'?

The bizarre nature that such a conflict would acquire makes it doubly essential that tendencies that promote the idea of limited nuclear use are quickly quashed. Tampering with the taboo against the very use of nuclear weapons, even if low-yield or limited, could only end up opening more possibilities of use. There is no guarantee that nuclear weapon possessors would stop after limited nuclear strikes, or that this trend would not spread to other regions. Once nuclear weapons come into play, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which any nation could stop at using just one such weapon.

Indeed, this is a slippery slope and best arrested through a collective commitment to constrict the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies, and certainly to eschew the idea that limited nuclear strikes could be more acceptable than larger nuclear strikes. Conventional military logic may uphold this idea, but the nature of nuclear weapons and the damage this would cause to the socio-economic, political and psychological fabric of inter-state relations cannot support it.

India stands protected against the possibility of *any* nuclear use by its doctrine of massive retaliation. To argue that 'limited' nuclear weapons response with low-yield weapons would be more credible in the eyes of the adversary is to take the first step towards accepting the idea that the adversary's first, 'limited' use would be tolerated and responded to in a proportionate manner. This idea of war-fighting with nuclear weapons is exactly what the Indian nuclear doctrine wisely

jettisoned by suggesting that the non-ordinariness of nuclear weapons demands an extraordinary response. In the face of emerging tendencies to popularise the idea of limited nuclear strikes, India must not only stand steadfast on its understanding of nuclear deterrence as being best derived from the imposition of unacceptable punishment, but also expose the folly and dangers of such misguided ideas.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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