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IS NUCLEAR BRINKMANSHIP A NEW NORMAL?

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Moscow's nuclear threats over Ukraine have become more frequent. Since February 2022, when Russia sent its troops into Ukraine, Russian President Putin has issued statements displaying Moscow's willingness and readiness to use nuclear weapons in case Russia feels the need to defend itself. Putin has talked about considering amending the nuclear deterrence policy. He has categorically said, "From a military-technical point of view, we are, of course, ready.... weapons exist in order to use them".¹ In May this year, Russia started the first stage of nuclear weapons drills involving Iskander and Kinzhal missiles.² The Defence Ministry said that this is to ascertain the readiness of the units and equipment for "the combat use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to respond and unconditionally ensure the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Russian state in response to provocative statements and threats of individual Western officials against the Russian Federation."³ In June, Russia began the second stage of drills to practice the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs).⁴ Russia has also indicated that it is likely to resume production of intermediate and shorter-range nuclear-capable missiles.⁵

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normal in a world where rogue nations like North Korea heavily rely on threatening the first use of nuclear weapons. However, Putin has taken a step further in the series of coercive actions to control Western assistance to Ukraine. He has announced not only cooperation with North Korea but is also considering supplying arms to it.

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While the West has been perturbed and strategic dialogue has been dominated by the threat of nuclear escalation in the ongoing crisis/conventional war, this phenomenon is not new for the Indian sub-continent. Every crisis between India and Pakistan invariably carries a threat of nuclear weapons ever since Pakistan unofficially announced that it had acquired nuclear weapons in 1987. Pakistan has perpetually tried to mitigate the potential threat of Indian conventional aggression (in response to its acts of terror) with the threat of the use of nuclear weapons. The threat was initially used by Islamabad by announcing the possession of a nuclear bomb and then through subsequent periodical announcements regarding Pakistan's first-use doctrine and projection of a low threshold.

Pakistan started to seriously consider nuclear weapons after their defeat in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, which led to the disintegration of Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who served as President and Prime Minister of Pakistan, was always in favour of Pakistan's acquisitions of nuclear weapons and under his leadership, systematic efforts for building nuclear weapons commenced post-1971 war. Nuclear weapons were perhaps seen as the sole guarantor of Pakistan's security against the (perceived) hegemonic India, which remains Pakistan's number one enemy to date. This threat was nurtured and highlighted by the Pakistan's military and treated as 'indispensable' in order to sustain its dominance in the social, political and economic dynamics of a democratically weak state.

The central assumption underlying Pakistan's progress and build-up of its nuclear arsenal is that a credible nuclear deterrent would compensate for the inferiority of its defence forces and their relatively small size. Pakistan received generous support from China for its nuclear programme, and in its pursuit of nuclear power status, it also received financial assistance from Saudi Arabia and Libya. Eventually, it did share nuclear data and expertise with Iran, Libya, and Iraq.

Pakistan's unofficial announcement of its nuclear bomb acquisition was made by A.Q. Khan, the father of the bomb, in a famous interview with the veteran Indian journalist Kuldeep Nayar. This announcement was made to counter the potential threats it estimated from *Operation Brasstacks*, which took place which took place during 1986-1987 in

the Indian state of Rajasthan (bordering Pakistan). There were aggressive efforts from Pakistan to send a message to India, deterring it from any conventional military action. A Q Khan, in the interview, said:

“ Mr Nayar, if you ever drive us to the wall, we will use the bomb. You did it to us in East Bengal. We won't waste time with conventional weapons. We will come straight out with it.”⁶

Pakistan has long held the belief that being a weaker state, it can compensate for that weakness by taking bold initiatives, preferably with strategic surprise, to attack the Indian military capability and thus, reduce the adverse margin of capabilities. This was the military strategy it practised in all the wars it waged against India. Seen in this context, it is not surprising that it adopted the nuclear doctrine of 'First Use'. Islamabad often claimed that it would/could use nuclear weapons at the beginning of the war if the Indian military even crossed the international border.

Another critical phase of India-Pakistan tensions was during *Operation Parakram*, a major military mobilisation of the Indian forces in response to the Pak-sponsored terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. Lt Gen. Khalid Kidwai, former head of the Strategic Planning Division (SPD) in Pakistan's Nuclear Command and Control system, claimed in a 2002 interview with Italian journalists that “nuclear weapons would be used only “if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake”. He defined Pakistan's red lines and said that Pakistan would definitely use nuclear weapons in case deterrence fails and:

1. If India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory (space threshold);
2. If India destroys a large part either of Pakistan's land or air forces (military threshold);
3. If India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan (economic strangling);
4. If India pushes Pakistan into political destabilisation or creates large-scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilisation).⁷

The first two scenarios highlighted by Kidwai can be identified and measured to an extent, but the pronouncement of the third and the fourth scenario are intended to include a vast spectrum of scenarios (rather undefined and vague!) which could be a potential trigger for Pakistan to use nuclear weapons against New Delhi.

Even after more than twenty-five years of overt nuclearisation, Pakistan does not

have an officially announced written doctrine. The Pakistan's leadership adopted an unofficial code based on 'Indo-centricity', 'credible minimum deterrence' (now *full spectrum deterrence*), 'strategic restraint' and 'first use'. Pakistan's objective has been to deter any form of Indian military response, and thus, assertions on first use have been rather frequent by Pakistan. Islamabad has tried to project a low nuclear threshold, which, in its view, helps manage crisis situations by averting war.

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Pakistan's nuclear posturing has focused on maintaining ambiguity and projection of a low threshold with a 'First Use' doctrine. The nuclear threat has been used in the past rather frequently to deal with crises. Nuclear weapons for Pakistan serve mainly three objectives:

1. The nuclear weapons and First Use doctrine are meant to neutralise India's conventional superiority and to deter India from a conventional response in any form.
2. The weapons are projected as the ultimate guarantee for Pakistan's security and survivability.
3. Pakistan has tried to project its nuclear assets as an instrument of blackmail. The acquisition of the nuclear capability (in 1987) enhanced Pakistan's capability to wage and escalate the covert war in Kashmir. Policy-makers in Pakistan seem to be convinced that they will be able to carry on, or rather accelerate, their activities in Kashmir under the broader threat of using nuclear weapons if required, which would constrain India's strategic moves.

There have been certain doctrinal shifts, and Pakistan now appears to be very confident about *full spectrum deterrence*. Pakistan very conceitedly (and rather often) talks about the TNWs —such as nuclear-capable short-range missiles (NASR)—which, in its opinion, would deter India from a conventional military response. Pakistan claimed that it is developing a sea-based nuclear force to be able to match India's nuclear triad. The Naval Strategic Force command was announced in 2012. In January 2017, Pakistan conducted the first test of its submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM), the Babur-3.

Pakistan has maintained a posture of ambiguity and kept the various options open in terms of (1) when to use the nuclear weapons and (2) what types to use, ranging from TNWs like the NASR to medium-range ballistic missiles such as the Ghauri and Shaheen III, as well as aircraft and possibly a warship (for sea-launched missiles). The leadership in

Pakistan declared on various occasions (especially before the overt nuclearisation in 1998) that Pakistan would be ready to use nuclear weapons at the slightest trigger from the Indian side, projecting a low nuclear threshold.

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Pakistan conveniently claims to have developed the nuclear capability to be launched from all three platforms- land, air, and sea. The aim of the *full spectrum deterrence* is to deny New Delhi any space for a conventional move. Last year (2023), at an event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the nuclear test, Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai made a significant statement offering insights into Pakistan's evolving nuclear doctrine of *full spectrum deterrence*. He talked about the horizontal dimension of the *full spectrum deterrence*, which comprises “of a robust tri-services inventory of a variety of nuclear weapons”, and the vertical dimension, which “encapsulates adequate range coverage from 0 metres to 2,750 kilometres, as well as nuclear weapon destructive yields at three tiers: strategic, operational and tactical.”⁸ He also added that “Pakistan retains the liberty of choosing from a full spectrum of targets in a “target-rich India”...”⁹

The zero-range weapons do raise ample questions regarding what Pakistan implies by zero range. Conventional wisdom suggests zero-range could include short-range, frontline nuclear weapons, including nuclear artillery, shells or nuclear land mines.

Even though there might be some shifts in the posture and changes in the terminology of the nuclear doctrine, the central messaging for India remains unaltered. Pakistan's nuclear policy over the decades has demonstrated some interesting trends:

- 1) Reliance on the threat of use of nuclear weapons to deal with a wide range of crises vis-à-vis India. After the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 by India, the threat of nuclear weapons was repeatedly raised by former Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- 2) Scale up the risk of nuclear escalation and attract global attention to the bilateral tensions.
- 3) Continued focus on the expansion of the nuclear arsenal.
- 4) Focus on the build-up of the conventional military capability despite the alarming economic crisis.
- 5) Entangling of nuclear issues with conventional space.

- 6) Continue the sub-conventional war against India with varying intensity.

The escalation in terror attacks in India (in Jammu) since June 9 demonstrates Pakistan's continued strategy of using terrorism as a tool against India. Pakistan's nuclear posturing did suffer a blow to some extent following India's airstrikes in Balakot on February 26, 2019, in retaliation for the terror attack in Pulwama claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) on February 14, 2019. But its reliance on using the threat of nuclear weapons seems to remain unaltered. Pakistan's efforts to use the nuclear card in the past spasmodically stems from its basic insecurity as a state and its failure to develop its strengths. Pakistan's excessive reliance on the threat of the use of nuclear weapons and its assertion on "first use" has grown with the growing asymmetries between India and Pakistan.

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While the West has been debating and struggling to find answers to Russia's brinkmanship, India has been facing the challenge of Pakistan's nuclear posturing for more than three decades now. Two critical questions are: 1) With the nuclear threat being used rather frequently and casually to contain conventional actions in the Russia-Ukraine crisis, what does it imply for the psychology (and will) of Pakistan, which relies on nuclear weapons to conduct acts of terrorism (in India) and also aims at restricting India's military retaliation?; and 2) How will the emerging trend of nuclear brinkmanship impact the strategic stability in the South Asian region, which is witnessing an expanding nuclear arsenal and an alarming rise in terrorist activities with a wide range of terror networks competing on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border?

Notes:

¹ Guy Faulconbridge and Lidia Kelly, "Putin warns the West: Russia is ready for nuclear war", *Reuters*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-ready-nuclear-war-not-everything-rushing-it-2024-03-13/>. Accessed on June 01, 2024.

² "Russia starts 'tactical nuclear drills' near Ukraine border", *Al Jazeera*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/22/russia-starts-tactical-nuclear-drills-near-ukraine-border>. Accessed on June 02, 2024.

³ Mark Trevelyan, "Russia starts exercise to simulate launch of tactical nuclear weapons", *Reuters*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-it-starts-nuclear-military-drills-2024-05-21/>. Accessed on June 03, 2024.

⁴ Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia begins second stage of tactical nuclear weapon drills with Belarus", *Reuters*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-belarus-start-second-stage-tactical-nuclear-drills-ministry-says-2024-06-11/>. Accessed on June 15, 2024.

⁵ Guy Faulconbridge and Dmitry Antonov, "Putin says Russia may resume global deployment of intermediate range missiles", *U.S. News*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-06-28/putin->

says-russia-to-resume-production-of-intermediate-range-missiles. Accessed on June 30, 2024.

⁶ “If you drive us to the wall, we will use the bomb’ - In December 1986, India launched the largest war game ever. Pakistan responded with a message of its own” *The Telegraph Online*, November 4, 2007, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/7-days/if-you-drive-us-to-the-wall-we-will-use-the-bomb-in-december-1986-india-launched-the-largest-war-game-ever-pakistan-responded-with-a-message-of-its-own/cid/1534921>. Accessed on June 20, 2024.

⁷ Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, *Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan*, Landau Network – Centro Volta Report, January 2002.

⁸ Speech by Lt Gen (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor National Command Authority and former DG SPD, on 25th Youme-e- Takbeer, May 26, 2023, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, <https://issi.org.pk/speech-by-lt-gen-ret-d-khalid-kidwai-advisor-national-command-authority-and-former-dg-spd-on-25th-youme-e-takbeer/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.



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