



Pakistan's Nuclear Posture: Implications for South Asian Stability

BOTTOM LINES

- Pakistan's first-use asymmetric escalation nuclear posture has created a vicious circle where extremist organizations based in Pakistan, shielded by Pakistan's aggressive nuclear posture, can target Indian cities with virtual impunity.
- Although this posture has seemingly deterred Indian conventional retaliation since 1998, its credibility requirements generate significant risks of theft and unauthorized or accidental nuclear use, particularly during crises with India.
- This instability and these risks will amplify to intolerable levels if India moves toward a conventional "Cold Start" posture, which will place the Indian subcontinent on a permanent crisis footing.

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PAKISTAN'S ASYMMETRIC ESCALATION POSTURE

Terrorists from Lashkar-e-Taiba—a group historically supported by Pakistan—laid siege to Mumbai in November 2008, crippling the city for three days and taking at least 163 lives. But India's response was restrained; it did not mobilize its military forces to retaliate against either Pakistan or Lashkar camps operating there. A former Indian chief of Army Staff, Gen. Shankar Roychowdhury, bluntly stated that Pakistan's threat of nuclear use deterred India from seriously considering conventional military strikes.

Pakistan's asymmetric escalation nuclear posture aims to credibly threaten the first use of nuclear weapons on Indian ground forces—likely on Pakistani soil—to deter significant Indian conventional action against Pakistan. Even though Pakistan claims to

store its nuclear weapons in demated form, they can be assembled and mated rapidly as a crisis unfolds to credibly threaten early first use. Although both India and Pakistan have been *de facto* nuclear weapons states since the 1980s, it was only Pakistan's operationalization of an aggressive first-use nuclear posture in 1998 that created significant instability at both lower and higher levels of conflict.

To maintain the credibility of this posture, Pakistan devolves nuclear assets to the envisioned end users in the Pakistan military. Although the release of nuclear weapons is nominally subject to the authority of the National Command Authority (NCA), there may be few physical impediments preventing lower-level military commanders from releasing nuclear weapons if they deem it necessary. This arrangement would ensure the usability of Pakistan's nuclear weapons even if the NCA were decapitated or otherwise out of communication. As such, it is unlikely that Pakistan has robust permissive action links (PALs) that require centralized authorization, given that its command-and-control architecture may not be reliable enough to support such negative controls. Instead, if Pakistan

employs PALs, they likely would be weak, bypassable locks similar to early-generation U.S. devices that could be circumvented in a crisis or conflict scenario.

Pakistan thus deters Indian conventional action through two complementary mechanisms: (1) the threat of authorized nuclear first use in a conventional conflict at some unspecified, but relatively early, threshold; and (2) the “mad-man” mechanism wherein a lower-level military commander decides to take matters into his own hands and release nuclear weapons at a threshold earlier than the NCA may otherwise enforce.

Since 1998, Pakistan’s leadership has believed that this asymmetric escalation nuclear posture prevented India from escalating conflicts or retaliating with significant conventional force, following a series of Pakistani or Pakistani-affiliated provocations. In the 1999 Kargil War, the second phase of the Operation Parakram Crisis in June 2002, and after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Indian leaders contemplated significant conventional retaliatory strikes against Pakistan but ultimately refrained from military action, partly out of fear of uncontrollable escalation to the nuclear level.

Since Pakistan’s adoption of an asymmetric escalation posture, South Asia has barreled toward increasing instability. Elements within Pakistan—whether explicitly or implicitly backed by the state—can now provoke India even in its metropolitan heart with virtual impunity, shielded by Pakistan’s nuclear posture. While India’s assured retaliation nuclear posture has not deterred these provocations, Pakistan’s nuclear posture has neutralized India’s conventional options for now; limited retaliation would be militarily futile, and more significant conventional retaliation is simply off the table.

THE CURRENT PRICE OF DETERRENCE

Pakistan’s deterrence success comes at a significant price to its security and the region’s. To ensure the credibility of the asymmetric escalation nuclear posture, Pakistan faces an unholy deterrence/

management trade-off. In particular, the Army is forced to cede both nuclear assets and some degree of authority to lower-level officers to ensure that its nuclear weapons are usable if necessary. Many of the risks to Pakistan’s nuclear assets are well known: insider-facilitated theft, risks during transportation, and risks during crises. Especially in a crisis, the emphasis on usability may shift so severely for deterrence purposes that the risk of theft and unauthorized or accidental nuclear use may rise significantly.

Perhaps the scariest implication of these arrangements is that extremist elements in Pakistan have a clear incentive to precipitate a crisis between India and Pakistan, so that Pakistan’s nuclear assets become more exposed and vulnerable to theft. Terrorist organizations in the region with nuclear ambitions, such as al-Qaida, may find no easier route to obtaining fissile material or a fully functional nuclear weapon than to attack India, thereby triggering a crisis between India and Pakistan and forcing Pakistan to ready and disperse nuclear assets—with few, if any, negative controls—and then attempting to steal the nuclear material when it is being moved or in the field, where it is less secure than in peacetime locations.

THE FUTURE PRICE OF DETERRENCE

India’s revisions to its conventional doctrine also pose significant future risks. To redress its perceived inability to retaliate against Pakistan-backed conventional and subconventional attacks, India’s military is moving toward its much-vaunted “Cold Start” doctrine, which envisions prepositioning holding and armored units closer to the international border to enable surprise offensives against Pakistan from a “cold start.” The aim is to reduce Indian mobilization times to enable the Indian military to rapidly achieve limited objectives below Pakistan’s nuclear threshold and before international pressure forces Indian offensives to halt. Although Cold Start is still several years away from being fully in place, there are two worrisome implications of India’s move to this revised conventional posture.

First, the pressure and ability for India to act quickly once Cold Start is in place could allow military logic to outpace political deliberation. One of the key features of Indian restraint in Kargil and Operation Parakram, as well as after the Mumbai attacks, was that the political leadership had time to deliberate and, in some cases, override the military. In a Cold Start world, the emphasis on maintaining the element of surprise could result in the Indian military quickly dragging India's political leadership into a conflict, ceding escalation control to the Indian and Pakistani militaries with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Second, India's move toward Cold Start fails to appreciate the dynamic coupling of Pakistan's nuclear posture to India's conventional posture. The Pakistan Army is obviously not sanguine about a conventional posture whose sole aim is to enable surprise offensives against Pakistan. Given Pakistan's fears that any Indian military operations may threaten the existence of the state, there is little distinction between limited and total war. Thus, to deter Indian surprise offensives, Pakistan could be forced to move to a ready nuclear deterrent on near hair-trigger alert. In such a scenario, Pakistan's asymmetric escalation nuclear posture would move to a permanent crisis footing, where the overriding emphasis on rapid usability would result in Pakistan's nuclear weapons being highly exposed and even more vulnerable to theft and unauthorized

or accidental use. This could be an intolerable risk for regional and international security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Unfortunately, there may be limited steps the United States can take to remedy the situation, given Pakistan's fears of U.S. intentions regarding its nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, to the degree possible, the United States and other nuclear powers should take whatever steps possible to improve the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear posture without sacrificing deterrent power. Second, the international community should lean on India to abandon its Cold Start conventional doctrine. Although Pakistan-backed terrorist attacks against India is unacceptable, India's solution should focus on improving domestic intelligence and law enforcement to prevent such attacks, rather than on developing a conventional posture that enables rapid surprise retaliation and that spawns significant risk of uncontrollable escalation past the nuclear threshold.

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