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South Asia: Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Strategic Risk

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Synopsis:

Pakistan's testing of a tactical ballistic missile lowers the nuclear threshold in the antagonistic India-Pakistan relationship. A symmetrical response from India will aggravate the situation rather than enhance its security.

Commentary

ON 19 APRIL 2011, Pakistan successfully tested the Nasr (Hatf-IX) short-range ballistic missile. With a range of 60 km, the missile is a tactical weapon designed for "warfighting" or battlefield use. This development threatens to destabilise the strategic relationship between India and Pakistan. Though both countries conducted low-yield tests appropriate for tactical weapons in 1998, neither showed interest in tactical weapons at the time. Indian strategic experts, some of whom have already advocated the development of tactical weapons as part of a "flexible response" strategy, will inevitably press for a symmetrical capability. That is not a good idea.

Intents and Outcomes

The testing of the Nasr represents one more step in an on-going action-reaction process that is built on the tussle over Kashmir. Sheltered by nuclear deterrence, Pakistan has been able to pressurise India by backing groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba that have carried out violent attacks against Indian targets. Hamstrung by the risk of escalation involved in a conventional military response, India in turn has tried to carve out strategic space for a suitable riposte. Threats to launch limited strikes or to go to war came to a head following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. But the military mobilisation that followed under Operation Parakram was slow and cumbersome, brought a like response from Pakistani forces, and ultimately failed to stop the flow of terrorists from across the border.

The Indian Army then began developing the so-called "Cold Start" strategy, which envisages rapid forward movement of compact, highly mobile forces to occupy small slices of enemy territory to obtain a bargaining advantage. Pakistan's response has been to threaten tactical nuclear attacks against Indian forces. In theory, the use of tactical nuclear weapons is designed to minimise the scope for escalation to a larger war involving a major nuclear exchange. But rational intent does not necessarily produce rational outcomes.

Lower Nuclear Threshold

The advent of tactical nuclear weapons to South Asia lowers the nuclear threshold in the event fighting breaks out. Though nuclear weapons are generally considered "unusable" because of their horrific effects, small weapons designed for battlefield use are inherently more usable than big ones because their destructive

capacities are relatively limited and because they target military assets rather than population centres. In addition, tactical weapons are less amenable to centralised command and control – the decision to use them has to be delegated early to obviate the risk of communication failure in the midst of combat. Local commanders may be tempted to resort to tactical nuclear weapons in adverse situations where they come to believe they have to “use them or lose them”.

Avoiding escalation is difficult because the mere presence of nuclear weapons complicates decision-making enormously. In the India-Pakistan context, the distinction between tactical and strategic weapons is blurred by the short distances involved. The Nasr may be designed for use against military targets, but Amritsar, with a population of over a million, is only 28 km from the Pakistan border and falls well within its range. From the Indian perspective, it has to be assumed that the city would be vulnerable to a nuclear attack in the event fighting breaks out. This will compel India to place its nuclear weapons on high alert if conflict breaks out.

Moreover, once fighting has begun, Indian conventional attacks against Pakistan’s conventional targets may inadvertently threaten or destroy its nuclear assets, including command and control systems, thereby triggering a nuclear response. All of this applies even if India does not respond to the Nasr by producing and deploying its own tactical weapons. If it does develop its own tactical weapons, the risks will be multiplied. Finally, once the critical nuclear threshold has been crossed, there is every possibility that escalation will be hard to stop in the heat and confusion of conflict. We must bear in mind that war involving nuclear weapons has never been fought and that if it is, it is likely to involve a succession of events on scales of time and destruction that are unprecedented and qualitatively different from human experience thus far.

Nuclear Self-deterrence

It could be argued that the Pakistani threat to initiate the use of tactical nuclear weapons will be self-deterred. After all, 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. This again assumes a logical, rational process and does not account for non-rational outcomes that inevitably accompany the fog of war, when information and control are limited and human responses under pressure are unpredictable.

Conceivably, localised combat can be contained over a considerable period of time in a nuclearised environment. In 1969, Soviet and Chinese forces engaged in limited fighting for several months even as their nuclear forces remained poised for use. The Kargil conflict in 1999 was even less portentous in this respect as combat was restricted to a relatively small area along the Line of Control that divides the two armies. Nonetheless, the emerging strategic landscape must give us pause; it blurs the boundaries between nuclear and conventional weapons and shifts the centre of gravity of decision-making from the central to the local. It may still be possible to avoid escalation, but one can hardly wager the lives of millions on it.

The Larger Issue

The larger issue is about India’s appropriate response to Pakistan’s irredentism. Clearly, military responses are burdened by excessive risk. India needs neither tactical nuclear weapons nor Cold Start-type offensive strategies. It makes more sense to sustain the dialogue currently under way and, for what it is worth, try and engage the Pakistani military, which remains the ultimate arbiter of the country’s politics.

After all, the military was on board the impending Manmohan-Musharraf breakthrough of 2007 before the Pakistani President’s plummeting political fortunes brought the process to an abrupt halt. Failing this, India needs to continue to strengthen its domestic defences, which were sorely exposed by the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and persist with negotiations. Confidence building measures to deploy ballistic and cruise missiles away from the border must be given priority.

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