DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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An informal deterrence relationship had existed between India and Pakistan well before nuclear weapons were tested. However, a more formal and structured deterrence framework began to take shape after the nuclear tests, Kargil Conflict and the experience of escalation in 2001-02. The assumptions that influenced Indian strategy are:

- That overt nuclear capability had increased Pakistan's freedom of action to pursue a more aggressive sub-conventional military strategy against India.
- Therefore, despite the presence of nuclear weapons, India considered it essential to re-assert the relevance of conventional war as an instrument of policy.
- And that, India's conventional military capability was sluggish and not adequately geared to fight a swift but limited conventional war against Pakistan.

These considerations led India to develop the Cold Start or Proactive Strategy. This strategic innovation from Pakistan's standpoint created instability in the domain of conventional deterrence. To redress this situation, Pakistan has proceeded to revise its war fighting concept besides showing inclination towards developing tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs).

However, many security analysts believe that these developments in the conventional cum nuclear domain have increased the possibility of nuclear escalation, even in a limited war scenario between the two countries. They argue that TNWs deployed in the combat zone could be targeted, either advertently or inadvertently, resulting in a premature nuclear exchange, that command and control over deployed TNWs would be problematic, thus increasing the risk of unauthorized launch. Also, these weapons would add significant costs without adding commensurate value to the already in place deterrence. Finally, deployed nuclear weapons in the combat zone would be lucrative targets for terrorists. These considerations strongly suggest that TNWs would enhance nuclear instability in South Asia; hence they should neither be developed nor deployed.

These are logical arguments, except that nuclear stability is being viewed in isolation. I will therefore propose that we adopt a more holistic approach in which we examine the politico-strategic context, take into account the complete deterrence framework that includes besides nuclear, the sub-conventional and conventional domains as well; give due consideration to the strategic approaches of both sides and the linkages that exist between different levels of conflict.

I will further suggest that while the infrastructure and wherewithal to implement India's Proactive Strategy or Pakistan's Response Strategy are still in the development and deployment stage, the strategic environment is evolving in a manner that may diminish the relevance of these strategic innovations. The emerging scenario is being shaped by the decade long conflict in Afghanistan and its deleterious effects on Pakistan. The multi dimensional crises confronting Pakistan is likely to transform it. Thus the turn of events in Pakistan could substantively alter the existing politico-strategic paradigm between India and Pakistan, which might require a response much different than what India and Pakistan have become accustomed to and have been preparing for, in recent years.

Politico-Strategic Framework

Without going into the intricacies of the adversarial relationship, it will suffice to say that the Kashmir Dispute has been and still is the primary source of conflict between the two countries. Besides the historical legacy and the principle that underpins Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, the rising profile of the water issues is adding another important dimension to this dispute. This implies that for Pakistan the exigency to pursue a satisfactory solution to the Kashmir Dispute could become more intense in the coming years.

Pakistan being a smaller country seeks to alter the status quo in Kashmir, while India seeks to perpetuate it. This creates a complex strategic proposition, wherein Pakistan, through a mix of politico-military initiatives, seeks to *persuade or compel* India to concede on Kashmir, while at the same time deter India's possible military reactions. Over time, both countries have become engaged in a wide spectrum military competition that extends from the sub-conventional to conventional and nuclear levels. Due to the nuclear overhang, both sides have had to assimilate deterrence as the predominant factor in their military strategies.

Pakistan defines the conflict in terms of India's obstinacy and repression in Kashmir, while India does so in terms of sub-conventional proxy warfare and terrorism. The presence of a military stand off implies that a political deadlock exists on critical issues, and that both sides feel that progress on those issues can only be made through the employment of military means.

The dominance of terrorism as a world wide security concern has also created a tendency within the International Community to view the Indo-Pak Conflict through the prism of terrorism. It is important to remember that militancy and terrorism is a *symptom* and not the *cause* of conflict. Therefore, while dealing with the symptom is important to maintain strategic stability, it will be a serious mistake to ignore the primary cause of conflict.

Deterrence Objectives

- **Pakistan's strategic objectives are**:-
    o Persuade or compel India to alter the status quo in Kashmir.
    o Deter India's conventional military threat.
    o Deter India from attempting or supporting initiatives to   de-nuclearize Pakistan.
    o Deter India from wrongfully exploiting the provisions of the Indus Waters Treaty.

- **India's strategic objectives are**:-
    o Deter Pakistan from using sub conventional/limited military initiatives as means to change the status quo in Kashmir, or to damage India.
    o In the event of conventional war, deter Pakistan from threatening or initiating nuclear use.
    o Persuade or compel Pakistan to dismantle militant outfits existing in or operating from Pakistan.
    o Persuade or compel Pakistan to accept the status quo in Kashmir.

The Military Strategic Framework

While constrained to remain within the deterrence framework, both sides indulge in brinkmanship and risk manipulation whenever they find it necessary, or expedient, to do so. I will term this as a 'Strategy of Manipulating Threats' and highlight some of the salient features:

- As stable deterrence across the entire spectrum of conflict will preclude the possibility of influencing political outcomes by military means. Therefore, one side may at some point, find it strategically expedient to deliberately destabilize a segment of deterrence in order to influence a particular political outcome.
- For example, India suspects that Pakistan may escalate conflict at the sub conventional level in order to nudge India to negotiate over Kashmir.
- To counter this move, India will destabilize conventional deterrence by manipulating the threat of conventional war.
- Pakistan's response to this threat war will be to articulate a conventional cum nuclear response, this will cause nuclear instability.

This kind of strategic interaction shows that asymmetric capabilities at different tiers of conflict create the logic for an escalatory dialectic in order to offset the advantage gained by one side or the other. The other point to note is that there are linkages which tie the sub-conventional level with conventional and nuclear levels of conflict.

It is thus important to view deterrence stability as a whole to ensure that it remains stable across the entire conflict spectrum, as instability in the lower tiers will progressively cause instability in the higher tiers as well.

Reviewing Deterrence Stability

Political Stability

As I mentioned earlier, deliberately creating instability at a chosen segment of the deterrence spectrum could be a strategic move to influence political outcomes. Therefore, evaluating the political climate and the pattern of interaction between the two countries will be helpful in developing a balanced and objective assessment of deterrence stability.

For Pakistan, nudging India to negotiate over Kashmir is the key issue. India's obstinacy over Kashmir causes frustration that has so often in the past induced Pakistan to take limited military initiatives in Kashmir; the resumption of the Composite Dialogue is a step in the right direction.

For India, besides maintenance of status quo in Kashmir, the critical issue is proxy warfare and terrorism. If India is convinced that militancy in Kashmir is not externally supported and that terror attacks in India are not traced back to Pakistan, this will reduce the incentive to deter sub-conventional attacks by threatening conventional military retaliation.

Presently, the emerging issue is non state terror networks acting on their own to launch terror attacks on India. If such an attack of significant magnitude occurs, the political pressure on the Indian Government to take punitive action will be substantial. Therefore, in order to ensure crisis stability, it is important for both countries to develop a robust framework to deal with such an eventuality.

Deterrence stability should not be seen as functioning within a frozen political context. The decade long war in Afghanistan and its blowback effects, along with other related factors are causing significant internal flux within Pakistan. These evolving developments could generate new imperatives for deterrence stability.

The Changing Context of the Sub Conventional Threat

As I alluded to earlier, the strategic assumptions on which India based its Proactive Strategy are changing. At present, Pakistan has no appetite to undertake any military initiative in Kashmir. On the contrary, non state militant and terror networks have acquired a degree of strategic autonomy in Pakistan. This implies that they can contest the writ of the State in selected areas, launch large scale attacks against sensitive targets, have caused the commitment of large portions of the military in counter militancy operations and by degrading the internal security environment have seriously affected the economy. Besides aggregating in certain areas, they have a diffused presence all over Pakistan. These non state actors could possibly launch large scale attacks beyond Pakistan's borders as well.

In these circumstances, India needs to review its response strategy to sub-conventional threats. Response to terror attacks by autonomous terror networks cannot be the same as those in which there is State complicity. Possible response options for India could be:

- Firstly, given the state of mistrust, if India assumes Pakistan's complicity and retaliates with conventional military means, it will cause significant escalation as the conflict transits towards conventional or nuclear domains. Furthermore, such a move could also strengthen the hand of terror and militant networks within Pakistan.
- Secondly, India could choose to take direct military action against them as is being done by US in FATA.
- Lastly, response option could also include compelling, persuading or assisting Pakistan to act against terror outfits, through non military means. For India, the last option would be most desirable.

Stability of Conventional Deterrence

Over the last decade, India's strategy has focused on conventional retaliation as the way to counter the sub-conventional threat. The large scale mobilization in 2001-02 was a somewhat crude attempt, which produced mixed results.

Since then, India is implementing certain conceptual and structural innovations in the form of Cold Start or Proactive Strategy; this is a more subtle approach intending to create certain strategic effects. These are:

- First, by positioning integrated, mobile and flexible military forces near Pakistan's borders, India is putting in place a credible capability capable of implementing conventional military options that range from punitive strikes against militant targets to full scale conventional war.
- Second, the strategic advantage of forward military posture available to Pakistan is being neutralized.
- Third, the emerging technological possibilities to modernize and integrate the armed forces are being utilized.

Taking into account India's retaliatory policy, the growing military asymmetry and the ongoing implementation of the Proactive Strategy, Pakistan is convinced that deterrence in the conventional domain is becoming unstable. To redress this situation, Pakistan has revised its war fighting concept, which involves both restructuring and repositioning of conventional forces, besides showing an inclination towards developing TNWs. The logic behind Pakistan's strategic moves is to maintain a credible linkage between conventional war and nuclear escalation, thus making the decision to initiate conventional operations, even at a limited scale, sufficiently complicated and dangerous for India.

Stability of Nuclear Deterrence

All strategic decisions have pros and cons. Introduction of TNWs is meant to ensure that conventional deterrence does not fail. However, if it fails and conventional war is initiated, the ensuing scenario will be fraught with nuclear instability. The chances that such a conflict could quickly escalate to the nuclear level cannot be ruled out.

Therefore, in my view, the imminent possibility of nuclear escalation will impose stringent limits on the conduct of conventional conflict. Both sides will be receptive to direct or indirect mediation, due to which the conflict could be quickly concluded. The Kargil Conflict is a good example, where both sides adopted unilateral escalation control measures, despite the fact that there was no immediate danger of nuclear escalation.

There is no denying the fact that deployment of TNWs has significant risks as well, and the chances that something goes wrong resulting in a nuclear exchange cannot be ruled out. It is precisely this danger and uncertainty that from Pakistan's point of view; will ensure stability of deterrence in the conventional domain.

The crux of the issue is to decide where to build a strong firewall, either, before the start of conventional war, or, between conventional war and nuclear escalation. There are pros and cons for both options; but apparently, Pakistan prefers the former option.

Pakistan's security managers view TNWs more from the value they add to conventional deterrence and less from the point of view of how things will shape up, if deterrence fails. On the contrary, analysts arguing against TNWs giving less importance to their deterrence value, tend to focus on the dangerous scenario that will emerge, if deterrence fails.

Enhancing Deterrence Stability

From the ensuing discussion we draw the following conclusions that can enhance deterrence stability. These are:

- The political climate between the two countries must be improved to ensure that strong political impulse to destabilize deterrence is not created. This can be ensured if the ongoing political dialogue moves from 'procedural' to 'meaningful' stage. From the political stand point, these talks must create hope that progress is being made towards the settlement of the fundamental cause of conflict, which is the Kashmir Dispute.
- From the military stand point, efforts in the direction of arms control are not likely to succeed as India's strategic outlook goes much beyond Pakistan. Even it will be very difficult to reach an agreement on what are 'Pakistan specific' military capabilities, I will therefore recommend that efforts be made to develop a ' Deterrence Stabilization Regime' with the aim of enhancing deterrence stability across the entire spectrum of conflict.
- Such a regime should include tangible mechanisms to enable both sides to verify that the agreed upon stabilization measures are being actually implemented. Some of the parameters of this regime could be:-
  - India will have to be convinced that Pakistan is not complicit-either actively or tacitly- in the terrorist activities of non state actors based in Pakistan. Also, that across the board action is being taken to dismantle all terror/militant networks.
  - Conversely, Pakistan must be convinced that deterrence stability between the two countries will not remain hostage to the activities of autonomous non state terror networks. This involves a clear understanding that there will be no conventional retaliation in the event of a terrorist attack.
  - A structured framework should be developed that facilitates cooperation and intelligence sharing against terror networks, along with an agreed upon response mechanism that springs into action, should a terror attack materialize. This will obviate the knee jerk responses we saw on both sides, in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks.
  - The emerging conventional postures envisage quick response capabilities through increased mobility and forward positioning of forces, this will cause significant crisis instability as the window for mediation during a crisis will be very restricted. There is a need to build in adequate and reliable recess in the respective conventional military postures.
  - Assessing threat and developing a response is a sovereign prerogative. It seems that the security managers of Pakistan feel that the emerging conventional threat from India can only be effectively deterred through an appropriate combination of conventional and nuclear means.
  - Therefore, in my opinion, development of TNWs by Pakistan is inevitable. Hence efforts can be made to avoid their deployment. This can be done by creating strong firebreaks that ensure sufficient stability at the conventional level of conflict.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will reemphasize three key points. Firstly, instead of TNWs, the most important factor that can destabilize deterrence is the strategic autonomy of terror networks. Secondly, deterrence stability should be viewed as a whole, and a comprehensive regime should be formulated to achieve it. Thirdly, deterrence stability will only be sustainable if a substantive political discourse is seen as making headway towards the solution of critical political issues that divide the two countries.