Pakistan’s Tactical Nukes: Relevance and Options for India

Though Pakistan’s nuclear-weapons policy continues to remain ambiguous, it has been candid in admitting to have introduced tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), in spite of the concerns raised by the international nuclear non-proliferation community. Development of nuclear-capable short-range missile systems, rapid increase in production of fissile material for warheads, and the implementation of “full-spectrum deterrence” capture the importance that Pakistan now ascribes to TNWs in its national security calculus.

Pakistan argues that it has introduced TNWs in response to India’s Cold Start doctrine of waging low-scale and lightening-swift conventional attacks. The Cold Start doctrine was introduced by then Chief of Indian Army staff, N. C. Vij, in April 2004 with the objective of mobilizing forces rapidly to significantly hurt Pakistan while simultaneously not crossing Pakistan’s strategic nuclear threshold. Though the armed forces including the Indian Army and the Air Force conducted a series of military exercises from 2004 up until 2007, the Indian civilian government, which has the final say in matters of national security policies, did not acknowledge the existence of such a doctrine. Irrespective of the validity of Pakistan’s justification, Pakistan’s TNWs have now become a reality, making it important to examine the impact Pakistan’s TNWs could have on India and its national security. Whether it uses Cold Start or not, if India wants to keep open the option of launching a low-scale conventional attack on Pakistan, then it needs to
examine whether it can credibly deter the use or counter the threat of retaliatory use of TNWs by Pakistan via its own nuclear doctrine.

To that end, strategic analysts in India have questioned the efficacy of two elements of India’s nuclear doctrine—its no-first-use (NFU) policy and the posture of massive retaliation—in countering the threat of use of TNWs by Pakistan. This article assesses the impact of Pakistan’s evolving nuclear weapons policy on India’s nuclear doctrine by addressing five sequential issues. The first section deals with the status of development and deployment of TNWs by Pakistan. While much of that status remains publicly unavailable, the first section attempts to assess that by reading into the declared shift in Pakistan’s nuclear weapons policy to gauge its intentions and by considering developments such as the increase in size of its nuclear arsenal and the introduction of nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles. The second section assesses the relevance of Pakistan’s TNWs to Indian national security, arguing that while the impact of Pakistan’s TNWs on India’s security have been much hyped, these weapons have limited relevance – only when India seeks to retain the option of launching a conventional military attack as a response to Pakistan’s proxy war. The third section analyses the two elements of India’s nuclear doctrine – the NFU policy and the posture of massive retaliation—in order to examine why India’s nuclear doctrine fails in credibly deterring the use or the threat of use of TNWs by Pakistan. It identifies the credibility deficit of the posture of massive retaliation as the problem. The fourth section examines in detail the shortcomings of the posture of massive retaliation to draw two key factors that demand revision for the posture to be credible – to make targeting strategy flexible and the scale of retaliation threatened to be between massive and proportionate. The fifth and final section makes recommendations for revising India’s nuclear doctrine, taking into consideration how India can make these corrections to credibly deter the threat of use of TNWs by Pakistan while also addressing some critical implications of such proposed changes.

The credibility deficit of India’s posture of massive retaliation is the problem.

Pakistan’s Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Because Pakistan has not declared its nuclear doctrine, much of the analyses on its nuclear-weapons policy depend on relevant press notes released by its office for Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and statements given by its officials, both serving and retired, from the National Command Authority (NCA) and
the Strategic Plans Division (SPD). It was in fact the April 2011 press briefing published by the ISPR—following the successful flight-testing of the nuclear-capable ballistic missile Hatf-IX or NASR, which spoke of the missile’s relevance for deterrence at shorter range—that led to discussions on the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan and its implications on strategic-stability in South Asia. Three broad developments since then must be studied to understand Pakistan’s intentions and capabilities to develop and deploy TNWs—Islamabad’s shift to “full-spectrum deterrence,” its development and induction of nuclear-capable short-range missile systems, and its rapid increase in the production of fissile material.

**Full-Spectrum Deterrence**

First and perhaps most important of these developments has been Pakistan’s official reference to the objective of full-spectrum deterrence (FSD) for its nuclear weapons. FSD was first mentioned in 2013 in an ISPR-issued press release, which noted that “Pakistan … would maintain a full spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression.” This press release captured the highlights of a meeting of Pakistan’s NCA, which is “the highest decision-making authority on nuclear and missile policy issues, and oversees all nuclear and missile programs.” Retired general Khalid Kidwai, a member of the NCA who headed Pakistan’s Strategic Plans Division for 15 years, made an explicit reference to full-spectrum deterrence at the 2015 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference.

Having begun its journey as a state with nuclear weapons with minimum deterrence as its objective, Pakistan’s approach has undergone a gradual but significant change. Based on the ISPR’s press release and statements made by officials of the SPD, one can deduce that Pakistan now approaches nuclear weapons to meet the objective of FSD. What makes FSD an important development is that the policy expands the scope of deterrence to cover not just the threat of the first use of nuclear weapons but also the threat of a conventional attack.

Although Pakistan calls FSD a subset of its policy of credible minimum deterrence (CMD), the claim does not account for the visible and substantial tension that exists between the two principles. FSD fails to fit any definition of “minimum.” Following the nuclear tests conducted in 1998, Pakistan announced that it would follow a policy of “minimum deterrence” – a policy that emphasized keeping the size of the arsenal quantitatively small. Pakistan’s former scientists and SPD officials deemed 60–70 nuclear warheads sufficient for Pakistan to deter India. By 2000, however, discussions in Pakistan began on how quantifying the
minimum in static numbers would not work and that the minimum itself would have to be modified in order to ensure the credibility of the deterrent in the face of the evolving threat from India.7

“Credible” was thus added to minimum deterrence and that significantly diluted its essence. CMD is a flexible concept – it is up to the country to decide what the minimum number of nuclear weapons required is in order to make the deterrent credible. Over the years, it thus allowed Pakistan to justify the continuing increase in the size of its nuclear arsenal. In some sense, the shift to FSD has limited significance as Pakistan has already gone down the path of expanding its nuclear arsenal in order to cover up its perceived conventional inferiority vis-a-vis India. Yet, retention of the word “minimum” in the principle would leave sufficient room for policymakers and the army to justify any reduction in the size of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal in the future should they deem that feasible, without any breakaway from the country’s underlying principle governing its nuclear weapons policy. A shift to FSD, on the other hand, takes away such space and embraces an expansive nuclear weapons program for the foreseeable future. FSD has overshadowed CMD in almost all official or quasi-official pronouncements and statements in recent years, alluding to the latter’s substitution by the former.

Pakistan already has had strategic nuclear weapons to deter the threat of a large-scale conventional attack by an adversary. Reference to the goal of countering aggression of all scales formalized the role of tactical nuclear weapons under the principle of FSD in deterring the threat of low-scale conventional attacks, below Pakistan’s strategic nuclear threshold.

**Nuclear-Capable, Short-Range Missile Systems**

Another set of developments in Pakistan that is relevant has been the tests of nuclear-capable missile systems of varying ranges that can broadly be classified as short-range. The missiles tested by Pakistan include ballistic missiles *Nasr* (*Hatf*-IX of a range of 60–120 km) and *Abdali* (*Hatf*-II of a range of 180 km), and cruise missiles *Babur* (*Hatf*VII of a range of 700 km) and *Ra’ad* (*Hatf*-VIII of a range of 350 km). Most important of them all have been the test of the *Nasr*. The 2011 ISPR press release announcing its successful test noted that “the missile has been developed to add deterrence value to Pakistan’s Strategic Weapons Development program at shorter ranges. *Nasr*, with a range of 60 km, carries nuclear warheads of appropriate yield with high accuracy, shoot and scoot attributes. This quick response system addresses the need to deter evolving threats.”8

Though India, too, has conducted tests of short-range missile systems, New Delhi has not referred to any of the systems being used as a nuclear weapon. Pakistan, on the other hand, has explicitly referred to their use with nuclear warheads for deterrence at shorter ranges and scales, adding to nuclear deterrence at strategic levels.
Fissile Material for Nuclear Devices

The third set of developments most relevant to this front has been a rapid increase in the production of weapons-grade fissile material. A recent study by Washington-based nuclear weapons policy analysts and South Asia watchers, Toby Dalton and Michael Krepon, note that “today, Pakistan is outcompeting India in fissile material for nuclear weapons by about four to one.” The study notes that while India may have a larger stockpile of weapons-grade plutonium, Pakistan holds about 3.1 metric tons of highly enriched uranium (HEU), which theoretically allows Pakistan to construct up to 240 nuclear weapons against 120 by India. Moreover, less plutonium is required for a warhead than HEU for an equivalent yield. In order to catch up with India, Pakistan has constructed four production reactors at Khushab, allowing it to produce 25 to 50 kg of plutonium per annum, which is four times India’s plutonium production rate. The 2015 study concluded that “in the next five to 10 years, Pakistan could have a nuclear arsenal not only twice the size of India’s but also larger than those of the United Kingdom, China, and France, giving it the third-largest arsenal behind the United States and Russia.”

Tests of nuclear-capable, short-range missile systems and Pakistan’s rapid expansion in the number of nuclear warheads further consolidate Islamabad’s growing reliance on nuclear weapons. Given that its perceived conventional inferiority vis-a-vis India currently is the reason for its greater reliance on nuclear weapons, Pakistan’s nuclear reliance is only going to increase in the future as India expands its conventional capabilities to match up with China.

Relevance to Indian Security

Pakistan has justified the introduction of TNWs by calling it a response to India’s “Cold Start” doctrine. The Chief of Indian Army staff proposed this doctrine in April 2004 to inflict damage on Pakistan through a low-scale conventional strike in response to any Pakistani proxy war. The Indian government, which retains complete control over implementation of any strategy of national security, has however refused to incorporate Cold Start as an officially accepted military strategy. Even following the November 26 (26/11) terror attack in Mumbai in 2008, though the Indian Army had placed the option of Cold Start on the table, as per media reports, the then-Indian government had completely dismissed it, noting that a strike across the international border would be provocative and would escalate matters. A leaked 2010 U.S. embassy cable also notes that India lacks both the political will in the immediate term to implement the Cold Start doctrine and the military capability to sustain it in the long term.
Nonetheless, the introduction of TNWs lowers Pakistan’s nuclear threshold to a level that arguably takes away the option of launching a low-scale conventional strike from India. But India’s consideration of launching a low-scale conventional strike arises from the need for New Delhi to respond to Pakistan’s proxy war against India. While it is true that in 2008, after the Mumbai terror attack, India did not opt to launch such a low-scale conventional strike, it cannot be concluded that New Delhi did not consider such an option. On the contrary, media sources have confirmed that India had planned a conventional retaliatory strike after the Mumbai terror attack, but instead opted for a diplomatic route.15

The relevance of TNWs would be completely lost if India chooses other responses to Pakistan’s proxy war. One of them links to what has been labelled as the “Doval doctrine.” Just months before being appointed as the National Security Advisor (NSA) of India in May 2014, Ajit Doval, in a speech given at the Sastra University in Tamil Nadu, argued that India’s approach to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism should shift from only defensive to defensive offense. Explaining this new approach further, Doval spoke of issuing a threat that if Pakistan is found involved in another Mumbai-style terror attack in India, then it will face consequences in Balochistan—an indirect reference to supporting the secessionist movement in the province of Pakistan.16

The efficacy and credibility of the threat of sub-conventional war as a deterrent is still to be seen, and its assessment is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is, nevertheless, that India has alternatives to respond to Pakistan’s proxy war. Similarly, Michael Krepon, in response to an article in South Asian Voices on May 4, 2015, questioned the relevance of Pakistan’s TNWs if India decides to launch a low-scale air-strike instead of a ground attack inside Pakistan’s territory. He added that in such a scenario not only would Pakistan’s TNW be irrelevant, but the possibility of Indian airstrikes targeting Pakistan’s TNWs deployed near prospective battlefields would make them a liability for Rawalpindi.17 George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, in their book Not War, Not Peace? Motivating Pakistan to Prevent Cross-Border Terrorism, also assess a myriad of responses for India to Pakistan’s proxy war, including air, nuclear, covert and other non-violent actions.18

Pakistan’s TNWs, thus, remain relevant to India only if New Delhi prefers to retain the option of launching a low-scale conventional attack on the ground as a response to Pakistan’s proxy war. Consequently, it is only then that India would be required to assess the efficacy of its nuclear doctrine in credibly deterring the threat of use of TNWs by Pakistan.

Efficacy of India’s Nuclear Doctrine

In assessing the efficacy of India’s nuclear doctrine in credibly deterring, or countering, the use of TNWs by Pakistan, two prominent elements of the current doctrine
require careful examination. First is the NFU policy, and second is the posture of massive retaliation. In fact, most of the debates pertaining to the revision of India’s nuclear doctrine ever since the doctrine was made public in 2003 have been about these two elements.

**NFU Policy**

Experts have questioned the value of India’s NFU policy in the face of Pakistan’s evolving nuclear posture. For instance, one Indian strategic thinker, professor P.R. Chari, argues that perhaps it is “India’s commitment to a no first use posture” that “has encouraged Pakistan to adopt its present adventurist strategy.” NFU is considered a defensive policy with normative roots. It, however, does not stop India from deterring the use or countering Pakistan’s threat of TNW use. New Delhi’s official policy, captured in a 2003 press release “regarding the nuclear doctrine and operational arrangements governing India’s nuclear assets,” for instance, notes that “nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere.” The NFU policy, therefore, allows India to threaten Pakistan with nuclear retaliation if the latter uses TNWs first.

The purpose of the NFU policy is about deterring solely the first use of nuclear weapons by an adversary or countering the threat of nuclear first use. Not having NFU policy, on the other hand, expands the scope of nuclear deterrence against both first use of nuclear weapons and a conventional attack. The NFU policy is thus in harmony with the Indian understanding of nuclear deterrence, which is only to deter the first use of nuclear weapons by an adversary. Many countries, such as the United States, Russia, and Pakistan, retain the first use option—it allows them to use nuclear weapons to also deter a conventional attack. New Delhi, however, does not see any utility of nuclear weapons in deterring a conventional attack or countering the threat of it. This understanding of nuclear deterrence and the consequential NFU policy is therefore not problematic vis-a-vis the threat from Pakistan (although it could be from a conventionally superior China, but an assessment of that is beyond the scope of this paper).

**Posture of Massive Retaliation**

Building upon the argument that the NFU policy allows India to threaten Pakistan with nuclear retaliation, it becomes important to have a nuclear retaliatory posture that makes nuclear deterrence credible. The Indian nuclear doctrine as captured in
the 2003 publicly released document states that “nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.”

While “massive retaliation” remains a term whose interpretation is subjective and thus its definition could vary, its reference since the beginning of the Cold War has been in the context of countervalue targeting, like city-busting. In the Indian context as well, massive retaliation, for which its strategic nuclear forces are retained, essentially refers to the threat of using nuclear weapons to destroy countervalue assets such as population centers and industrial bases.

While summing up the criticism of India’s posture of massive retaliation, an Indian journalist on strategic affairs, Manoj Joshi, argues that “the words ‘massive retaliation’ carry heavy freight in strategic literature, having been used momentarily by the Eisenhower administration and quickly modified.” Despite criticism, the Indian government has continued to defend the posture of massive retaliation. For instance, former Indian Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, while serving as the Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board of India, endorsed the use of “massive retaliation.” Saran, however, fails to address questions on the credibility, or the lack of it, of the massive retaliation posture, and his argument appears more as an attempt to reinstate credibility through semi-official reiteration of the posture.

There are three major flaws of the posture of massive retaliation. First, it is a highly inhumane retaliatory posture. As Manoj Joshi questions, “would India really destroy Lahore with nuclear detonation if a single [Indian] army brigade that has entered Pakistani territory were to be struck by a single, low-yield nuclear weapon?” The United States during the early years of the Cold War had also come to the same understanding, following which it abandoned the strategy of massive retaliation. Another Indian strategic expert, Manpreet Sethi, in the same vein, argues that India, “with its culture of military restraint,” would find it “prudent and, more importantly, morally unacceptable” to inflict punitive damage on Pakistan.

The second flaw, which builds upon the argument that massive retaliation is morally unacceptable, is that the burden of escalation from the tactical use of nuclear weapons by an adversary to massive retaliation involving city-busting is so high that no government in New Delhi can possibly be seen bearing the weight of it. In other words, this is different from the morality argument because it means that the threat of massive retaliation would not be sufficiently credible to deter Pakistan from using them at a low level in the first place.
Third and finally, the doctrine fails to account for the possibility of a failure of deterrence, which in effect diminishes its credibility further. In the event that deterrence fails and India follows up on its retaliatory posture, it would invite retaliation from Pakistan of a similar scale and nature, which would not be in New Delhi’s interest. It escalates a nuclear conflict too much.

All of the three related issues emerge from the lack of credibility of the retaliatory posture. Though the Indian nuclear doctrine, and particularly the posture of massive retaliation, is drafted for the purpose of nuclear deterrence, it fails to take into account the possibility of the collapse of nuclear deterrence, say, when Pakistan uses a TNW. This accounting failure consequently reduces the deterrence value of the nuclear doctrine prior to its collapse. If deterrence were to fail and India had to retaliate as per its nuclear doctrine, having an implementable nuclear retaliatory posture in the doctrine becomes vital for its credibility.

Thus, while the NFU policy does not prohibit India from deterring Pakistan’s use of TNWs or countering the threat of use of TNWs, the issue lies with the lack of credibility of the posture of massive retaliation as a deterrent. The following sections of the paper assess the viability of options to address this shortcoming in India’s nuclear doctrine.

**Elements of a More Credible Nuclear Posture**

In debates on replacing “massive retaliation” in India’s nuclear doctrine, a prominent alternative is “proportionate retaliation.” In effect, this would require India to develop and deploy its own TNWs. In fact, strategists who were part of the committee drafting the 1999 Indian nuclear draft doctrine had considered proportionate retaliation as the posture to be included in the doctrine.

There are, however, some drawbacks of referring to the posture of proportionate retaliation. If nuclear deterrence fails, this posture would be more implementable in comparison to massive retaliation, thus making the threat of it more believable. But the problem emerges from the scale of the threat. A retaliation of proportionate scale may not be credible enough in deterring the first use of a TNW by Pakistan. If for example, Pakistan were to consider using TNWs to halt the conventional advance of, say, Indian armored battalions, the threat of a limited tactical nuclear exchange may serve Islamabad’s goals of halting the Indian conventional advance in Pakistani territory. Therefore, although proportional retaliation would limit damage, if escalation to strategic levels could be avoided, it would not deter nuclear use in the first place.

There are other factors, too, which make the option of a proportionate retaliatory posture unviable. Given that the credibility of the deterrent is dependent on the possibility of its actual implementation when deterrence has failed, India
would be required to develop and deploy TNWs. While India has already tested short-range missile systems capable of delivering nuclear warheads of smaller yield, it would require vastly expanding its nuclear arsenal in order to be able to mark off Pakistan’s deployment of TNWs along the international border. At a time when India is seeking to actively engage with the global non-proliferation community and is seeking membership in export-control bodies like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), rapidly increasing its nuclear stockpile and subsequently deploying TNWs may run counter to India’s larger interests.

Furthermore, deployment of TNWs to prospective battlefields would require a significant change in India’s nuclear command-and-control structure. It is well established that the very nature of TNWs makes it necessary for their launch authorities to be delegated to local commanders in charge. In India, implementing such changes to the nuclear chain of command is arguably unlikely, considering that the civilian government continues to exercise complete control over its nuclear assets. (The Political Council of India’s Nuclear Command Authority, which is the sole body that can authorise use of nuclear weapons, is chaired by the Prime Minister. The Executive Council, whose responsibility is to provide inputs for decision making by the Nuclear Command Authority and execute the directives given to it by the Political Council, is chaired by the National Security Advisor.)

Critical analyses of the postures of massive and proportionate retaliation therefore reveal the need for a third option, and for two vital elements which India’s retaliatory posture must meet in order to successfully deter or counter the use of TNWs by Pakistan: targeting strategy and the scale of retaliation.

Flexible Targeting Strategy

The massive retaliation posture and its understanding, even in India, assume India would pursue countervalue targeting. While counterforce targeting (which, for the purpose of this paper, is the policy under which nuclear assets would target items that have direct military utility to the adversary) could also be labelled as “massive,” that, unfortunately, is not the understanding of “massive retaliation” in New Delhi (or anywhere else), and is therefore also not conveyed by any currently publicly released document or statement. A proportionate retaliation posture, on the other hand, would sufficiently leave the option open as far as the targets of retaliation is concerned, but, on the other hand, might not be sufficient for credible deterrence due to its insufficient scale of retaliation, discussed subsequently in this section.

Thus, as far as the targeting strategy is concerned, India’s retaliatory posture as assured in its nuclear doctrine should give New Delhi the freedom to identify targets in its retaliation, including both counterforce and countervalue retaliation, irrespective of the nature of first use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan.
Retaliation of Scale between Massive and Proportionate

Both scales of massive and proportionate retaliation have their drawbacks. Massive retaliation poses a threat of great magnitude, but the probability of its implementation is so low that it reduces the credibility of nuclear deterrence. On the other hand, proportionate retaliatory posture has a higher probability of implementation, but the magnitude of the threat is so low that it again diminishes the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. Thus, as far as the scale of retaliation is concerned, it should be significantly larger than proportionate, but not as large as “massive” (as understood in the Indian context to reflect city-busting). Such a retaliation posture would not require development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and could rely on strategic nuclear weapons of lower yields to target a variety of military assets of Pakistan including air-bases, military headquarters, components of command-and-control structure, missile silos, naval bases, etc.

It is important to highlight here that the scale of retaliation threatened need not necessarily be defined by, say, the yield of the device to be used for it. Assessment of that scale, especially one that makes the deterrent credible, must take into account the acceptability of the retaliation threatened to the adversary, which inadvertently requires an assessment of what the target is. Thus, in order to identify an appropriate retaliation that falls between the scales of massive and proportionate, a qualitative assessment of the targets and their respective value to the adversary must be made. While the risk of escalation to massive levels, involving city-busting, would always be present, the entire burden of escalation would not solely fall on India.

A Modest Proposal

The next step is to publicly revise India’s nuclear doctrine in a way that addresses the credibility deficit of the posture of massive retaliation. Before addressing that, however, there are a couple of arguments which require reconsideration.

Reconsiderations

First is that while the objective of India’s nuclear doctrine is nuclear deterrence, the doctrine fails to account for the possibility of a failure of nuclear deterrence. The strategy of massive retaliation is a case in point. The retaliatory posture is such that if Pakistan detonates a TNW, and nuclear deterrence thus fails, New Delhi would find itself unable to implement the strategy of massive retaliation for
reasons laid out in previous sections. This understanding, in turn, diminishes the credibility of the nuclear doctrine, even prior to the failure of nuclear deterrence.

The second argument to consider is whether India might follow a different nuclear posture once nuclear deterrence has failed. In an interview with The Hindu in 1999, then-Foreign Minister of India Jaswant Singh admitted that India will follow a different nuclear posture during wartime. It is not clear if India has already listed down its retaliatory options under different contingencies and it might well be the case that policymakers would consider all retaliatory options before picking one on a case-by-case basis. In the same interview, Singh also added that “Retaliation does not have to be instantaneous; it has to be effective and assured,” which also hints that the retaliation, once nuclear deterrence has failed, might not be pre-determined. This questions the value and relevance of the peacetime posture which India laid out in the publicly declared doctrine of 2003. For Singh, the purpose of the peacetime doctrine appears to be “convey[ing] a sense of assurance in [the] region [and] beyond so that [India’s] deployment posture is not perceived as destabilizing.” This suggests that India does not consider a publicly declared nuclear doctrine or posture important to make its deterrent credible. Reflecting continuity on such thinking, Indian strategic experts like Gurmeet Kanwal in recent years have also argued that, during wartime, India will not be tied down to its publicly declared posture and will have various retaliatory options to choose from.

Considering this argument that India does not seek to use its publicly declared posture to make its nuclear deterrent credible, it is not surprising that the posture and doctrine is criticized for failing to credibly deter Pakistan. On the other hand, if India chooses to use its publicly declared posture to make its nuclear deterrent credible, it would need to revise its peacetime posture in a way that has greater continuity with what it would follow during wartime, if they are to be different at all. If India is to have different nuclear postures during peace and war, then there should be greater continuity in the two postures so as to ensure that the publicly declared nuclear posture in peace remains credible as a deterrent.

A Flexible Targeting Strategy
This section, therefore, proposes to change the nuclear retaliatory posture as stated in the currently declared nuclear doctrine—massive retaliation—in a way that makes its implementation by New Delhi believable once nuclear deterrence has failed, thereby increasing the credibility of the nuclear doctrine. If indeed India would follow a different nuclear posture during war, then the proposed revised nuclear posture would also have greater continuity with wartime doctrine, and would not be as radically different as it currently appears to be from India’s current public doctrine.
As identified in the previous section, the two vital elements for a nuclear retaliatory posture that would make it more effective as a deterrent are the targets of retaliation and the scale. India’s nuclear retaliatory posture, as laid out in its nuclear doctrine, must therefore distinguish between the targets and the scale of retaliation, and define the two vital elements separately. Here, the targets of retaliation distinguish between countervalue or counterforce, and the scale of retaliation captures the magnitude of damage posed.

A flexible targeting strategy would leave both countervalue and counterforce targeting options open to New Delhi. Meanwhile, the second vital element, the scale of retaliation, must be greater than proportionate. While the word “massive” could reflect the appropriate scale of retaliation, that unfortunately has long been associated with a particular nature of retaliation—countervalue. Using the term “punitive,” which was also used in the 1999 draft doctrine proposed by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), in any public statement or document to reflect the scale of retaliation may work. It would be important, however, to highlight that retaliation would be escalatory and not proportionate. At the same time, escalation would not be such that the entire burden of it falls on India.

In order to increase the credibility of the threat posed by its new nuclear retaliatory posture, New Delhi would have to acquire the requisites to implement the posture in the event nuclear deterrence fails. While India’s preparedness for countervalue targeting has arguably existed for more than a decade now, New Delhi would have to revamp its capabilities for counterforce targeting. That would require not only missile systems of greater accuracy, but also real-time data on the locations and movements of counterforce targets. A wartime nuclear doctrine, if one exists, could already have greater details of targets and targeting policy, among others.

**Implications**

The proposed revision of the doctrine would also have important implications which require a careful examination. A primary concern is whether the revised nuclear retaliatory posture would require nuclear weapons to be deployed near prospective battlefields with local Indian commanders. As discussed with the case of proportionate retaliation, deployment of nuclear weapons near prospective battlefields with pre-delegation of launch authorities would require substantial modification of the command-and-control structure and is unlikely to happen in India, given relations between the civilian government and the armed forces.
This would also heighten the risks of accidental and unintended use of nuclear weapons. The revised nuclear posture of retaliation, however, would not involve deployment of nuclear weapons to prospective battlefields in a mated state, and thus also avoid the ancillary risks of pre-delegation of launch authorities. As argued in the previous section, the revised posture is about offering India flexibility with the targets while ensuring that the scale of retaliation is kept well above proportionate.

Diplomatic and political implications of the revised retaliation posture must also be weighed. While vertical proliferation of nuclear warheads and missile systems would be unparalleled if India opts for a proportionate retaliation posture, with possibilities of an arms race with Pakistan, the revision suggested herein would also require a significant expansion of India’s nuclear arsenal, though more qualitative than quantitative, especially as India prepares for counter-force targeting.

That being noted, developments in India already suggest that New Delhi is seeking to improve its missile capabilities: India in the last couple years has tested numerous nuclear-capable missile systems, including that of Prithvi-II (range 350 km), Agni-I (range 700 km), Agni-V (range 5000 km), and the advanced version of BrahMos missile (range 450 km). These developments, however, have not had a significant negative impact vis-a-vis international concerns over missile proliferation in India. This is evident from India’s June 2016 inclusion in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), a voluntary body that issues guidelines on exports of missile systems that can deliver weapons of mass destruction. A plausible explanation for the lack of significant international concern over the proliferation of missile systems in India is the perception of it being a responsible power, which has only grown over the years.

Another important implication of the proposed nuclear retaliatory posture would be accepting possibilities of limited nuclear exchange and nuclear warfighting, to which New Delhi has traditionally been averse. As pointed out earlier, by not taking on the entire burden of escalation as proposed herein, New Delhi could pose a threat on which it could follow up, should assigned contingencies arise—making its threat credible. That would, however, reflect India’s willingness to accept the prospects of limited nuclear exchange with Pakistan. While proponents of massive retaliation in India have flagged the dangers of accepting possibilities of limited nuclear exchange, they tend to ignore that India’s massive retaliation strategy also reflects acceptance of limited nuclear exchange, albeit that limit is significantly higher. By posing the threat of destroying Pakistani cities with strategic nuclear weapons, while leaving Pakistan’s strategic nuclear assets intact, India’s massive retaliation posture invites a similar response from Pakistan and it thus is not war-terminating but one that escalates war to the worst levels.
Making India’s Deterrent Credible

Requisites for and implications of the suggested revision of India’s nuclear doctrine must, however, be weighed against the efficacy and costs of means, other than low-scale conventional attack, of punishing Pakistan for its sub-conventional warfare. Pakistan’s TNWs fundamentally have limited relevance to India’s national security. Designed to take away from India the option of low-scale conventional attack as a way of punishing Pakistan for its sub-conventional war, Pakistan’s TNWs lose their relevance if India opts for other means of inflicting damage such as air strikes. If one or a combination of these other means were to be effective and affordable politically and economically, then the relevance of Pakistan’s TNWs from India’s national security perspective would be non-existent and the revision of nuclear doctrine would be superfluous.

TNWs are only relevant if India seeks to retain the option of mounting a low-scale conventional attack using its supposed advantage in ground military capabilities. It is in this context that India’s nuclear doctrine becomes relevant—whether it is able to successfully deter or counter the use of TNWs by Pakistan.

Two elements of India’s nuclear doctrine that have been heavily debated are the policy of NFU and the posture of massive retaliation. While the issue of no-first-use has gathered much of the public attention, this paper assesses that such a public debate is misplaced. India’s NFU policy does not inhibit India from deterring or countering the use of TNWs by Pakistan. It is, however, the posture of massive retaliation that fails to credibly deter or counter the use of TNWs by Pakistan.

Two vital elements of a nuclear retaliatory posture that make it a credible deterrent, as identified in this paper, are the targets and the scale of retaliation. As far as the targeting strategy is concerned, having a posture that allows for both counterforce as well as existing countervalue targeting options would be useful as that would leave more ambiguity in the eyes of India’s adversary. Meanwhile, a preferred scale of retaliation would be one that is neither so limited as proportionate nor so high that the entire burden of escalation falls on India.

Notes


25. Shyam Saran also clarifies any confusion over New Delhi’s interpretation of massive retaliation by stating that counterforce targeting and flexible response have lost their relevance in the current circumstances confronting India. This reflects how New Delhi’s interpretation of massive retaliation is a rigid counter-value targeting policy with use of strategic nuclear weapons. Shyam Saran, “Is India’s Nuclear Deterrent Credible?” Speech given at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, April 24, 2013, http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2013/05/Final-Is-Indias-Nuclear-Deterrent-Credible-rev1-2-1-3.pdf.
27. While Manpreet Sethi refers to the threat of inflicting punitive damage, which was from the 1999 draft of the doctrine, as morally unacceptable, the draft goes on to reflect that the shift to massive retaliation is further unacceptable on moral grounds. Manpreet Sethi, “Counter Pak Nuke Tactics,” New Indian Express, July 24, 2014, http://www.newindianexpress.com/columns/Counter-Pak-Nuke-Tactics/2014/07/24/article2345369.ece.
29. This remark was made by one of the members of the National Security Advisory Board that prepared the draft doctrine in 1999, Bharat Karnad, during a closed-door seminar, titled “Nuclear Energy, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament: Policy Options for the NDA Government,” organised by VPM’s Centre for International Studies from March 29 to 31, 2016, in Mumbai, India.
33. Ibid, emphasis added.
34. Ibid.

