

OPINION

Averting Nuclear War: Stretching the Limits of Democratic Political Rationality

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The general refrain in the strategic commentary in India is that nuclear deterrence will hold. There is little reflection on the possibility and outcome of its breakdown. It is generally believed that the ability to inflict 'unacceptable damage' on the enemy precludes the possibility of all-out war and ensures peace. Without contesting this rational understanding, this article considers the probability of use of nuclear weapon in retaliation in case of an eventual breakdown of deterrence. As some observations suggest, India's military doctrine of 'compellence' at the conventional level dubbed as 'Cold Start' may result in crossing of nuclear threshold by Pakistan in a situation of conflict. The resultant breakdown in

deterrence may be difficult for India to tackle. Can this be understood in terms of political rationality, as distinct from strategic rationality?

The issue of rationality in nuclear war is untenable in light of the process of decision making in a surreal environment, in terms of time-criticality, heightened political pressures and primordial passions that would attend any such such consideration. Besides 'rationality' for authoritarian regimes, such as that in communist China and of praetorian states such as Pakistan, would depend on institutional interests of the principal political player, the party and the army respectively. In comparison, national interest as determined in democratic societies would be logically different. The aim here is to argue that the

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nuclear option merely seeks to deter a nuclear enemy and limit the risk in a nuclear conflict. This is contrary to current deterrence thinking in India which seeks to inflict maximum punishment as the primary area of concern in strategic thinking. The present article contends that the promise of punishment is useful for deterrence, but it is superseded by the need to limit damage in case of a breakdown in deterrence.

Strategic rationality in democratic societies would require to be subordinated to political rationality. That the two are different is possible to discern from the well-worn quote by McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis:

There is an enormous gulf between what political leaders think about nuclear weapons and what is assumed in complex calculations of relative advantage in simulated strategic warfare. Think-tank analysts can set levels of acceptable damage well up in the tens of millions of lives. They can assume that the loss of dozens of great cities is somehow a real choice for a sane man. They are in an unreal world. In the real world of real political leaders..... a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's

own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable. Yet this unthinkable level of human incineration is the least that could be expected by either side in response to any first strike.....no matter what happens to weapons system in the meantime'¹

What would therefore constitute political rationality to respond to the use of nuclear weapons in a democratic society as ours?

It appears that in a nuclear crisis the primary responsibility of the political head in a democratic polity would be to ensure that there is no unwarranted increase in the nuclear risk to the nation. The foremost task awaiting the political leadership in the Political Council of the Indian Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) is thus to contain the risks. The choice then would be between inflicting punishment on the enemy and limiting the risk of escalation and retaliation to save India's population centres and critical infrastructure.

The members of the Executive Council of the NCA, charged with the responsibility to tender critical advice, are heads of services and departments, and on that count they would likely have their advisory

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function influenced, to some extent, by their representative function at the apex decision making body. Their advice is also likely to be along the lines of strategic logic in which follow-through with the punishment promised in the nuclear doctrine is recommended. This would be to enable in-conflict deterrence. If and since such retaliation would increase the risk of damage being received in turn, the political head is expected to consciously keep the parameter of 'limiting damage' to oneself above that of 'inflicting punishment' on the enemy.

Following from this proposition, a rational Indian war strategy in a nuclear environment is therefore one comprising limited war aims that would brook no expansion. The criterion employed to determine war aims assumes importance here. War aims should be important enough for risking nuclear escalation, but it should not be of an order for the enemy to get provoked start the attack. Pursuit of these should not entail the risk of suffering grievous losses in nuclear exchanges in case of breakdown of deterrence. It is important to ask whether such an option could be abandoned if running such huge risks is not warranted.

The pursuit of these aims by war

would pose the following choices to Pakistan: concede defeat to India and risk nuclear escalation. Pakistan may make concessions if Indian pursues reasonable war aims and does not resort to in-conflict expansion in its aims. However, Pakistan may prefer risking nuclear escalation to capitulation if Indian aims are perceived as expansive. Examples of expansive aims are: regime change or destruction of military capability to the point of disarming Pakistan. Limiting political aims and, correspondingly, military objectives in conflict situation, in line with the concept of limited war is quite natural in the nuclear age.

Therefore, it is critical for India to ensure that its aims are limited and it should be spelt out unambiguously at the very outset. In the age of 'Limited War', one must heed Schelling's views on this as a bargaining process', which implies that in such a situation each of the party concedes that 'in addition to the divergence of interest over the variables in dispute, there is a powerful common interest in reaching an outcome that is not enormously destructive of values to both sides.'² In case there is a breakdown in deterrence, limiting nuclear damage received clearly acquires an immediacy equal to inflicting nuclear damage on the enemy.³

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Additionally, while limitation may have received some attention in strategic literature, nuclear war termination has not. The conventional thinking in India in this regard is that in case of a nuclear war India would be able to survive a nuclear attack, while Pakistan would be 'finished'.⁴ The importance of consideration of nuclear conflict termination is further accentuated in light of skepticism on the possibility of limitation in case of a nuclear war. Among the sceptics are McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan and Robert McNamara.⁵ McNamara said,

'It is inconceivable to me, as it has been to others who have studied the matter, that 'Limited' nuclear wars would remain limited – any decision to use nuclear weapons would imply a higher probability of the same cataclysmic consequences as a total nuclear exchange.'⁶

Thus far only response to break down in deterrence has been reflected on. In the context of breakdown of deterrence, the question of how to terminate nuclear exchanges has been neglected.

The writings of late General Sundarji provides one option. The first stipulation governing the choice of targeting - in his words - should be: 'to terminate the nuclear

exchange at the lowest level with a view to negotiating the best peace that is politically acceptable.'⁷ If political leadership is responsible, then a nuclear exchange may be terminated at the lowest possible level, through an enlightened political compromise. If necessary, it may be required to terminate war to preclude further escalation, irrespective of political costs and non-attainment of war aims.

This is a departure from extant deterrence theory which decrees that nuclear deterrence is predicated on inflicting 'unacceptable damage' on the enemy. This is true if deterrence is operational. In case of its breakdown in a situation of nuclear first-use by the enemy, the issue of nuclear employment comes to the fore. While in-conflict nuclear deterrence is an important consideration, the more important parameter emerging in the circumstance is limiting nuclear damage to oneself.

Self-deterrence is not a negative phenomenon on the political plane, as distinct from the plane at which nuclear strategists practice their craft. The difference between the two is that of accountability; with the buck stopping at the political leadership. Many criticise the decision not to go to war in wake of the Parliament

attack as a case of self-deterrence on India's part. Instead, it can be seen as an exercise in political courage by Vajpayee, keeping at bay forces in favour of war. Deliberations on nuclear use, even if it were in response to an enemy nuclear attack, would require equal wisdom. McNamara has written: 'At that time, in long private conversations with successive Presidents – Kennedy and Johnson – I recommended without qualification, that they never initiate under any circumstances the use of nuclear weapons. I believe they accepted my recommendation.'⁸ This was despite the fact that the US and NATO nuclear strategy were predicated on nuclear 'first use'. The refrain in strategic literature that political resolve to use nuclear weapons requires nurturing and projection is fair enough for strengthening the credibility of deterrence. However, on deterrence breakdown, it would be a liability to demonstrate the resolve in an ability to take casualties as is the general thrust in nuclear strategic literature.

Self-deterrence has a persuasive case, even though it is a much maligned term. It is delusive to think India can survive a nuclear confrontation without taking on a lot of damage. Life, as they say, would never be the same again. India would cease to be the India we know of in

many ways, It may involve a change in the shape of its map. It could also impact the 'idea of India' and there may be a lurch towards the extreme right of the political spectrum and have lot of adverse effects on the socio-economic sphere.

Any nuclear attack by the enemy would potentially target multiple urban centres in northern India. Given the critical economic role of these urban centres in provincial and local economy the after-effects of such attacks would be severe. This might prompt local ethno-linguistic communities to post-facto question the wisdom of the political leadership to either provoke a nuclear engagement or its inability to avert such a suicidal engagement. They may seem it as a violation of the state's obligation to provide security to its people. The political fall-out of such an attack is thus hard to prophesy. Take for example the hypothetical cases of grievous damage inflicted on any of the major urban centres: Pune, Chandigarh, Jodhpur, Bangalore etc. Their loss would critically impact the relative standing of ethnic groups inhabiting any of these cities. That Pakistan has ceased to exist as a result of the punishment visited on it would be small recompense.

Secondly, the environmental

effects of such possible nuclear attacks have not been adequately studied.

The 'massive' punitive retaliation promised by Indian nuclear strategists would certainly have a subcontinent-wide impact, with the effects determined by the wind pattern. The long-term effects on unprotected groups, largely the poor, would be beyond the means of the state to address. The example of the five-day long fire in a petroleum depot at no less than a state capital, Jaipur, is a stark reminder of the poor state of disaster-preparedness that obtains in India.

These were reiterated during the observance recently of twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bhopal gas disaster. The insignificant incident in the Kaiga nuclear facility also points to India's vulnerability, irrespective of formation of a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and ten relief battalions.⁹

Lastly, the dimension of casualties likely to be incurred is unthinkable. It has been calculated by the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) of the US that in a nuclear exchange involving 24 warheads over 15 cities,

22.1 million people in India and Pakistan would be exposed to lethal radiation doses of 600 rem¹⁰ or more in the first two days after the attack. Another 8 million people would receive a radiation dose of 100 to 600 rem, causing severe radiation sickness and potentially death, especially for the very young, old or infirm. As many as 30 million people would be threatened by the fallout from the attack, roughly divided between the two countries.¹¹ Clearly, there is no cause to risk such an aftermath, leave alone precipitate it.

The worst case scenario is unlikely to come to pass. Nuclear war, undesirable for both sides, is unlikely to occur. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of 26/11, with limited war appearing as a promising option, the possibility of its inadvertent degeneration into a nuclear one cannot be entirely ignored. In case the unthinkable were to occur, limiting it in the first place and ending it at the earliest is primarily the responsibility of the political leadership in such a crisis situation. The political leadership of India has demonstrate utmost maturity in handling such crises until now and one expects it will continue to do so in future. ■

References

- 1 Quoted in Freedman, L., *Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1989, p, 344.
- 2 Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, New York: OUP, 1963, p.6.
- 3 This is at variance with Herman Kahn who lists 'Limiting damage' as the third of his list of objectives for a defender; the others being 'Punish enemy' and 'Stalemate war' (Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, p. 164).
- 4 Ali Ahmed, 'Illogic of Massive Retaliation', IPCS Articles, July 2009.
- 5 V. Tiwatia, 'The Doctrine of Limited Nuclear War', *USI Journal*, CXVIII (492), Apr-Jun 88, p. 149.
- 6 Robert McNamara, 'The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: The Perceptions and Misperceptions', *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983, p. 62.
- 7 K. Sundarji, K., *Vision 2100: A Strategy for the Twenty First Century*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers, 2003, p. 146.
- 8 Robert McNamara, 'The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: The Perceptions and Misperceptions', *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983, p. 79.
- 9 For details, see <http://ndma.gov.in/ndma/index.htm>.
- 10 A person's biological risk (that is, the risk that a person will suffer health effects from an exposure to radiation) is measured using the conventional unit rem ((roentgen equivalent in man). 100 to 200 rems may cause illness which may not be fatal. However, doses of 200 to 1000 rems may cause serious illness. Doses of more than 1000 rems are almost invariably fatal.
- 11 'The Consequences of Nuclear Conflict between India and Pakistan', NDRC, <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/southasia.asp>