

Tactical nuclear weapons in South Asia: the need to disavow development and deployment

India and Pakistan have a window of opportunity at this time to disavow the development and deployment of very low-yield nuclear weapons in the sub-kiloton or 1–2 kiloton range. Weapons such as these have apparent utility on a battlefield, and in compact forms can even be fired from artillery guns. They may have limited blast damage radii measured in hundreds of meters, cause relatively low levels of casualties, and are aimed primarily at military targets. The control of such weapons, once deployed, is problematic, as their control may be delegated to battlefield commanders. They could also be more susceptible to misuse than strategic weapons kept under a more centralized command structure.

Recently, the United States National Academy of Sciences issued a report on Technical Issues Related to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty.¹ The panel of experts that wrote the report concluded, amongst other matters, that India and Pakistan probably need additional tests to develop low-yield compact weapons in the 1–2 kiloton and lower range, though they might be able to do so with great difficulty using sub-critical or very low-yield clandestine tests. Given their current moratorium on tests and their need for additional tests, it is possible therefore that India and Pakistan have not yet developed small and compact nuclear weapons of very low-yield—although India demonstrated such a capability through its sub-kiloton tests in May 1998.

Pakistan has a ‘first use’ policy towards nuclear weapons—that is, Pakistan will not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if faced with a sufficiently threatening conventional defeat of its armed forces. This is similar to the American policy of Flexible Response enunciated by the United States Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1962 that ‘the United States is also prepared to counter with nuclear weapons any Soviet conventional attack so strong that it cannot be dealt with by conventional means’. Pakistan’s policy implies that ‘first use’ may be directed against Indian conventional forces, such as forward airfields, armoured columns and troop formations. Pakistan’s first use is not likely to be an all-out pre-emptive strike against Indian nuclear capabilities and cities. This creates a problem for Indian strategic thought—if Pakistan’s first use of nuclear weapons is tactical in nature, and limited to an attack on Indian military forces, perhaps even primarily on Pakistani territory, India’s reliance on deterrence based on punitive retaliation could be called into question.

Without the possession of tactical nuclear weapons, and without the option of a flexible, measured and proportionate response, the Indian Prime Minister may be faced with the grim options of either

calling for a massive and suicidal attack against Pakistani cities in response to a limited tactical use of a low-yield nuclear weapon by Pakistan or surrendering. This could well be called the ‘incredible nuclear deterrent’, rather than India’s professed aim to create a ‘credible minimum nuclear deterrent’! Further, if India has no tactical nuclear weapons, then Pakistan will expect a massive retaliation from India for Pakistan’s use of a tactical weapon. This could create an incentive for Pakistan to launch a more massive pre-emptive strike, if Pakistan were ever faced with the situation of being forced to use a tactical nuclear weapon for gains against a conventional Indian force.

One might mistakenly conclude, therefore, that the development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons of low-kiloton yields by India and Pakistan is apparently beneficial—in that, if deterrence fails, the destruction caused by a nuclear exchange restricted to small tactical weapons may be limited, though there are no guarantees that the exchange would not escalate out of control. In actuality, the development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons will be detrimental—making the use of nuclear weapons more probable, and deterrence less stable.

India’s Draft Report of the National Security Advisory Board on the Indian Nuclear Doctrine does address the issue of India’s possible response to tactical nuclear weapons use by an adversary though not very explicitly—and probably purposefully and rightfully so, to maintain ambiguity regarding India’s resolve to escalate in a crisis. The draft doctrine states that India’s ‘peacetime posture aims at convincing any potential aggressor that ... *any nuclear attack* on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor’ [emphasis added]. The phrase ‘any nuclear attack’ obviously includes a tactical nuclear attack. The Indian draft doctrine further states that India will ‘not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail’. This raises the possibility that even against the use of a tactical nuclear weapon, India may escalate to a far greater retaliation—that is, one that is unacceptable, assuming that a smaller retaliation with tactical nuclear weapons may be acceptable to the aggressor. The question is—what is ‘punitive retaliation’ and ‘unacceptable damage’? By remaining deliberately ambiguous, and not stating explicitly that the Indian punitive response will be proportionate, the Indian draft doctrine creates doubts for any potential aggressor, and increases in the aggressor’s mind the potential risks associated with the use of tactical weapons. The Indian draft doctrine, however, also states that the ‘strategic environment, technological imperatives and the needs of national security’ will decide the ‘actual size components, deployment and employment of nuclear forces’. Therefore, ‘punitive retaliation’ could well be a measured and proportionate response as long as it is unacceptable to the aggressor. The doctrine, therefore, holds open the possibility of India developing and deploying tactical nuclear weapons.

The problem for India and Pakistan with developing and then deploying tactical nuclear weapons is that this will make imagining ‘limited nuclear war’ more feasible and weaken deterrence. A limited nuclear war is certainly preferable to an all-out devastating nuclear exchange directed at major cities and agricultural and industrial infrastructure. However, the capability to engage in a limited nuclear exchange *increases* the likelihood of such an exchange actually occurring.

Therefore, now may be the time for both India and Pakistan to unilaterally declare that they will not develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons.² It is possible that an agreement between India and Pakistan disallowing the development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons of low-kiloton range may be of value to both in terms of strengthening deterrence stability. Such an agreement could pave the way for developing the infrastructure for intrusive monitoring and verification that will be needed in the future if the two countries ever decide to limit or eliminate nuclear weapons altogether. In the interim, instead of a mutually agreed upon framework, the two countries could simply adopt unilateral pledges to never develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons.

A similar situation exists between India and China regarding tactical nuclear weapons—that is, it would be destabilizing for either or both to deploy such weapons against the other. China has already developed tactical nuclear weapons. India and China have pledged ‘no first use’ of nuclear weapons. They could strengthen their pledges by stating that they will also never deploy tactical nuclear weapons against the other.

India could take the lead in this regard in South Asia. India could make a pledge similar to its ‘no first use’ policy. Reserving the right to develop tactical weapons if needed, India could pledge that it would never be the first to develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons against an adversary.

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Notes

1. National Academy of Sciences, Committee on Technical Issues Related to Ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, 2002, *Technical Issues Related to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*, Washington, DC, National Academy Press, available at <<http://www.nap.edu/books/0309085063/html/>> or <<http://www.nap.edu/html/ctbt/>>.
2. If either country has already developed tactical nuclear weapons (there is considerable ambiguity regarding the nature of each country’s nuclear weapons capability), then the declaration could be to never deploy such weapons against the other.

