

## PROSPECTS OF LIMITED WAR BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Farooque Ahmed Leghari,<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Ramzan Pahore,<sup>2</sup> & Muhammad Ali Pasha Panhwar<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract:

Since long India had been claiming space for conventional war between India and Pakistan in South Asia. After the two countries became nuclear power, India was restricted to launch a full-fledged war against Pakistan in the four crises between 1987 and 2002. India, therefore, seriously contemplated other options including to prepare for limited war against Pakistan. It introduced Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) in 2004 with the idea of launching a limited war against Pakistan. Under CSD, India planned to launch a quick and fast operation on Pakistan on the short notice of 72 hours to put maximum damage and then move its troops back to Indian mainland. Pakistan, on perceiving the threat and identifying the gap at the tactical level, went for the manufacture of nuclear weapons and stopped Indian pursuing the path of limited war. This article explores the limited war phenomena by using qualitative methodology and rich data collected through semi structured interviews from expert informants. This article clarifies that the possibility of limited war is present between India and Pakistan and there are significant chances that the limited war can be sustained in the region.

**Keywords:** India, Pakistan, limited war, Cold Start Doctrine, low yield nuclear weapons, crisis

### INTRODUCTION

India and Pakistan have been engaged in three severe crises after the emergence of Indian Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) in 2004. Although all crises were intense, but the Pulwama episode resulted in Balakot crisis in 2019 was of greater severity. It had the germs of limited war between India and Pakistan. This crisis gave a message to the world about the severity of conditions in South Asia. One crisis after another signifies the space available for war between India and Pakistan. Although Pakistan's strategic and low yield nuclear weapons have done enough to stop India from pursuing the path of full-fledged and limited conventional war against it. There are significant chances of limited war in the region which can be sustained but India is scared of Pakistan's nuclear strikes in a conventional war between the two countries.

This paper explores possibility of limited war between India and Pakistan. The qualitative method has been used in this research. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with expert informants from Pakistan, India and the United States (US). The thematic analysis is used in this research.

### LIMITED WAR AND NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Pakistan with its low yield nuclear weapons, have become successful to stop India from using limited war option against it. Indian limited war doctrine had the potential to put India and Pakistan into a severe crisis, resulting in a breach of a nuclear threshold. The limited war between India and Pakistan

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. Email farooque.leghari@usindh.edu.pk

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Media Studies, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: mramzzan@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

will have a severe risk of full-fledged war, resulting in nuclear escalation (Ladwig 2008, 159). It will be difficult for the policymakers on the two sides to control the situation once the war has been started between the two nuclear-weapon states (Ladwig, 2008). Both states are busy in testing each other's nerves and trying their best to fold conventional and nuclear doctrines in their favor.

Pakistan's manufacture of low yield nuclear weapons is meant to discourage Indians from launching a limited war against Pakistan, so these weapons serve the cause of peace. Tariq Fatimi commented, if India thinks that it will launch an adventure against Pakistan under CSD and Pakistan is simply going to accept it, "this is not going to happen." He further added:

Pakistani political leadership, Pakistani armed forces and the people of Pakistan, all are on the same page that if any Indian adventure takes place, Pakistan would response with all options available to it because when a country is faced with a dangerous situation then obviously it is left with no alternative but to safeguard its territorial integrity and sovereignty (T. Fatimi, personal communication, Oct. 30, 2015).

Pakistan is developing its sophisticated missile technology on a fast pace. It has developed "Shaheen and Ghauri series of long-range nuclear missiles, it often flaunts its 60-km Nasr (Hatf-IX) missiles with sub kiloton plutonium warheads as a counter to India's conventional military superiority" (Goshal 2015, 4). Pakistan is threatening India with low yield nuclear weapons in any Indian initiated limited conventional war against it. Indians are preparing for even fighting in nuclear environment against Pakistan which was visible with its military exercises Shatrueet. In this connection, Pandit (2016) added, "this exercise seeks to validate the capability of the Indian Army to 'first generate and then maintain' intense offensive maneuvers backed by long-range artillery and the Air Force." Furthermore, Ahmed (2014) remarked that there is a fragile balance of power in the region and the chances of conventional war are high which could result in a nuclear holocaust. On a similar vein, Chari (2014) argued that India and Pakistan's changing conventional and nuclear doctrines have become a serious threat to strategic stability in the region.

The two sides' continuous military modernization has resulted in lowering of the conventional and nuclear threshold which is not good omen as the two states already face a trust deficit. Arrival of CSD and low yield nuclear weapons in the region made things worse. In these new types of threats, the two sides have compressed the time factor that could prove fatal for this region. India needs to shun the policy of fighting a limited war against Pakistan because it has increased the risk of confrontation in the region. Therefore, the two states are suggested to reverse CSD and low yield nuclear weapons to strengthen strategic stability in South Asia.

Pakistan's low yield nuclear weapons have created a serious roadblock in the way of Indian intention of launching a limited conventional war against Pakistan. In this connection, Lieutenant General (R) of Pakistan Army, Khalid Ahmed Kidwai said:

Limited is something that is not controllable by one side when the two parties are fighting, one can't decide that the fight will be limited. It will take the mutual decisions of the two parties to decide to keep it limited or to expand it. If I decide it to limit it and you are not following it, how will it be limited? For example, India does one thing, Pakistan retaliates, Pakistan does another thing and India retaliates, then you get trapped into the situation where you cannot get out of it (K. Kidwai, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2015).

The limited war option is not doable in the nuclear environment because that can be converted into a full-fledged conventional war any time and then it could further result in a nuclear exchange. Indian CSD is dangerous and Pakistan cannot rely on the ideal intention that India will not attack Pakistan.

They are prepared and can go for an attack against Pakistan any time but we warn them that do not opt for that option because Pakistan will respond to it with its low yield nuclear weapons because these weapons have filled the gap at tactical level so better advised not to do it (K. Kidwai, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2015).

A number of experts opined that conventional or limited war is unlikely to happen. As Zamir Akram asserted, the option of a limited conventional war is not practicable between India and Pakistan because of nuclear weapons on the two sides (Z. Akram, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2015). Onkar Marwah asserted that both state's nuclear weapons have created a balance of terror, and despite threatening statements, the two sides cannot do anything (O. Marwah, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2016). Pakistan's inferiority in conventional military capability has made it more dependent on its nuclear weapons. Pakistan's development in all spheres of deterrence as it has gone for a 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' has made Indian option of war off the table (P. Das, personal communication, Feb. 9, 2016).

## **DISCUSSION**

India and Pakistan's changed military outlook have made many analysts worried about the situation of South Asia. The major concern among the security analysts is the short time in the decision-making process on the two sides because any state can miscalculate and lead to accidental war. Pervez Iqbal Cheema, Professor and Dean at National Defense University, Islamabad, said in this connection, "I am not sure, one thing may lead to another, and eventually they cross the threshold, you still may not know because the record of these two countries is not good" (personal communication, Nov. 13, 2015).

The psyche to check each other's nerves is not a good game. It seems visible all times that India and Pakistan remain busy to check each other's limits. Before the arrival of the CSD on the Indian side and the introduction of "low yield nuclear weapons" on Pakistani side, the situations were serious in 1987, 1990, 1999 and 2002.. Pakistan's decision to get low yield nuclear weapons stopped Indian intentions of launching limited conventional war against it. If India further takes measures to counter this Pakistani move, it will bring instability in the region (Sultan 2012, 163).

After the start of Indian CSD in 2004, both states faced another crisis in 2008 when the terrorists attacked Mumbai but Indians did not use this doctrine against Pakistan. This incident infuriated India as it started threatening Pakistan with war rhetoric. Though Indians had been working on CSD since 2004, but due to its initial stages, they could not go for a limited war against Pakistan. The nuclear factor worked during the crisis period as the restraint was witnessed on Indian side because Indians did not opt for war against Pakistan. The US diplomacy also seemed effective which stopped the two states from pursuing war options. This crisis did not have a dimension of a full-fledged conventional war because there was no military mobilization on the two sides of the border but it created a fear on Pakistan's side that India might go for a limited war against it. In this connection, analysts argued that the Indian CSD was in its initial phase in 2008 and it was the reason behind Indian's not opting for a limited war against Pakistan. The severity of crisis was noticed during Mumbai crisis as there

was an extreme anger on the Indian side. India also mobilized some of its forces at some places on Indo-Pak border but it was not a war mobilization. In this connection, Pakistan's former Foreign Secretary Akram Zaki argued about the severity of the situation prevailed during Mumbai crisis in these words:

India attempted an air attack on Mureedke but our response was very swift and we told the Americans that we (Pakistanis) have their flights in target and we (Pakistanis) will shoot it down so ask them to go back. They (Indians) came in with the intention of bombing; we locked their plan and we (Pakistanis) told them (Americans) that this is their plan and we will shoot them down, if they are not going to move back. If they (Indians) would not have gone back, we (Pakistanis) have shot them down then it would have been a major crisis (A. Zaki, personal communication, Nov. 11, 2015).

Above said lines of Zaki meant that India under extreme pressure from its public planned launching airstrikes into Pakistan but failed to do so. Furthermore, Zafar Iqbal Cheema, President, Strategic Vision Institute, Islamabad, said, "nuclear deterrence played a very effective role in defusing the crisis between India and Pakistan during 2008 crisis" (personal communication, Nov. 13, 2015).

India and Pakistan again faced another crisis in 2016 when insurgency and protests reached at their peak in Indian held Kashmir (IHK) after the killing of Kashmiri militant leader Burhan Wani at the hands of Indian forces. The tense situation led to Indo-Pak clashes on the border. The situation between the two states started worsening. The terrorist attack on Indian military headquarters in Uri, Kashmir on 17 September 2016, which resulted in the death of 19 Indian soldiers, fuelled the fire to the already adverse situation prevailing between India and Pakistan. India threatened Pakistan with revenge. Pakistan feeling an Indian threat, started preparing to face any Indian misadventure. India claimed of launching "Surgical Strikes" against terrorists inside Pakistani-controlled territory of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) on 29 September 2016. India further claimed that its forces entered into AJK and destroyed six terrorist launch pads and killed 40 terrorists. Pakistan rejected Indian claim of launching surgical strikes inside AJK. International media did not borrow Indian claim of surgical strikes and witnessed heavy firing between the two sides on 29 September 2016. While the defense analysts such as Ayesha Siddiq, speaking to BBC Urdu, said that Indian forces entered AJK, but it was about 200 meters and not two kilometers as claimed by Indian politicians (BBC Urdu 30 September 2016).

The latest crisis between India and Pakistan arose in 2019 during Modi's period. It was more severe than 2016 crisis as Indian Air Force (IAF) entered into Pakistan's airspace and dropped their payload in an uninhabited area. India claimed that it had targeted terrorist groups in Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and killed many militants who were planning to launch terrorist attacks against India. Pakistan denied Indian claim and clarified that Indian fighter planes entered Pakistan's airspace but they quickly returned when they were chased by Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The next day witnessed PAF aircraft targeting the plain areas in IHK. They were chased by IAF. PAF successfully downed one Indian Aircraft and captured one of their pilots. Pakistan released Indian pilot the next day as a good will gesture. India also had decided to go for missile strikes against Pakistan.

After the crises in 2016 and 2019, Pakistan's belief had been further strengthened that Indians were not going for a limited conventional war against Pakistan in presence of Pakistan's low yield nuclear weapons. Indian claim of launching surgical strikes in 2016 and air strikes in 2019 also confirmed

that Indians were now thinking of other options for tackling Pakistan than full-fledged or limited conventional war. By looking at the last two crises, it is discernable that Pakistan's commendable progress in its nuclear weapons programme has left Indians with limited military choices against Pakistan. Indians being unable to launch a limited conventional war against Pakistan, have been involved in sub-conventional warfare to support the insurgent and militant groups to create trouble in Pakistan (Naazer, 2019). In this connection, Pakistan's Akram Zaki said: "The nuclear weapons are preventing the direct attack while providing space for the indirect attack so the new type of warfare has been started in which what they (Indians) are doing in Baluchistan and at other places" (A. Zaki, personal communication, Nov. 11, 2015).

India and Pakistan's previous positions on nuclear weapons have been changed after the introduction of CSD and low yield nuclear weapons in the region. Pakistan has moved back from its previous position in which it called nuclear weapons as weapons of last resort and now narrates that it will use low yield nuclear weapons against Indian soldiers crossing Pakistan's border to launch a limited war. Indians have also brought a change in their official position regarding nuclear weapons against Pakistan. India stated to retaliate with massive nuclear retaliation if Pakistan uses low yield nuclear weapons against its forces either on Indian or Pakistani territory. Indians further clarified their position and showed intolerance against any attack from Pakistan be it strategic or low yield nuclear weapons. India threatened Pakistan that any attack will be responded with massive nuclear retaliation (Reference).

Indian CSD which allows Indian military to initiate war within 72 to 96 hours, makes the time factor compressed. This Indian strategy has made Pakistan feel worried because now it needs to remain prepared to respond to any such situation where India attacks Pakistan under the shadow of CSD. Indian CSD makes Pakistan insecure at the conventional layer. It justifies its position to stop Indian threat of limited conventional war with the threat of low yield nuclear weapons.

There have been major developments at the strategic and the conventional layers in South Asia between the two nuclear-weapon states of India and Pakistan. Both states have different perceptions. India claims that nuclear deterrence has averted nuclear war between India and Pakistan. It further claims that there is still space for the conventional war between the two states and it is only because of Indian strength in conventional forces. While Pakistan has a different view point. It claims that nuclear deterrence averts all types of wars in the region between the two nuclear-weapon states. And it is not in favour of the 'No First Use' pact offered by India. Pakistani perception lies basically in its weak conventional capability in comparison to India.

Both states have faced crises one after another with a gap of only a few years. India has lowered its conventional layer by introducing the CSD which has created serious security concerns for Pakistan. On the other side, Pakistan lowered its strategic layer to the tactical level by introducing low yield nuclear weapons. The situation has become very difficult as the two states do not understand each other and not leave a single chance to harm each other. India has formed Independent Battle Groups (IBGs) which are empowered to attack Pakistan within 72 to 96 hours if any terrorist attack occurs from Pakistan. In this connection, Maria Sultan, Director General, South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI), Islamabad, said: "No war will be thrust on Pakistan just because India wants a limited war" (personal communication, Nov. 5, 2015). This indicates that the power to start war or to take action against Pakistan has been transferred from the Indian elected government to Indian



military. This is not a good step. Indian military can opt for an adventure against Pakistan.

In this connection, any kind of that adventure could result in a misadventure as Pakistan will not allow Indians to fight a war on Pakistani territory. Pakistan has threatened to use the low yield nuclear weapons against Indian troops crossing its border with the intention of limited war. Furthermore, Pervez Hoodbhoy, former Professor at Quaid i Azam University Islamabad, said that once the war starts, it cannot be limited. If the nuclear weapons are being used, either small or big, it will result in unaffordable destruction because other side will also respond in the same way. Hoodbhoy further added that international mediation could only work when the conventional warfare is going on (P. Hoodbhoy, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2015).

In case of South Asia both India and Pakistan have enough nuclear weapons to deter each other. If Indian nuclear weapon attack will destroy Pakistan's main cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad and will put back Pakistan in 19<sup>th</sup> century state, Pakistan's nuclear attack on Indian main cities like Mumbai and Delhi will put India's economic development decades back. One may argue that when both states get the nuclear deterrence that is working effectively, then what is the need to disturb this equilibrium (Gupta 2014).

Furthermore, in connection to the above discussion, Pervez Iqbal Cheema, Professor and Dean at National Defense University, Islamabad, said that India and Pakistan are indulged in serious business with each other as the new steps taken by them are so problematic to put the two states at risk of war. India has operationalized its CSD, which is dangerous in its nature while Pakistan has generated low yield nuclear weapons that it claims to use if India attacks Pakistan even in conventional warfare. Further, Cheema P. I. added: "I personally believe that neither India nor Pakistan has realized when they have crossed the threshold because it is difficult for the two states to control the warfare" (P. I. Cheema, personal communication, Nov. 13, 2015). Furthermore, he argued that limited war is not possible between the nuclear weapon states, and both India and Pakistan should admit this fact as there has been no such examples in the past. It was seen during the bipolar era that even Americans talked about fighting a conventional war against former Soviet Union under nuclear umbrella but could not materialize it. In connection to the above example, India and Pakistan should restrain from opting the war as the two states are deeply involved in bitter relations and any war between the two can lead to a nuclear exchange and "the nuclear war is a suicidal war, where nobody is going to win (P. I. Cheema, personal communication, Nov. 13, 2015).

Although the two states claim to develop its nuclear weapons capabilities on the modern lines and bring changes in nuclear and conventional doctrines, India and Pakistan make the regional environment at risk of warfare (Chandaran 2017). India threatens with a limited war to force Pakistan to the negotiation table (Varthaman 2017), while "low yield nuclear weapons have given Pakistan the power to deter a conventional military attack from India and to continue its brinkmanship and it is, thus, looking for political advantages" (Sethi 2016).

Although India planned to get its CSD's benefits by threatening Pakistan with limited war, Pakistan developed low yield nuclear weapons to end Indian superiority. The whole process revolves in a series to threaten each other. India has always been searching space for launching the conventional war against Pakistan but it has failed to get its objective as Pakistan's nuclear weapons have become successful to bring a roadblock in Indian intentions for launching a full-fledged or limited

conventional against it. In this connection, while Ladwig (2008) argued that Indian limited war option can cause breakdown of deterrence in South Asia. Indian limited war doctrine had the potential to put India and Pakistan into a severe crisis, resulting in a breach of a nuclear threshold (Ladwig, 2008).

Rajagopalan and Mishra (2014) stressed that nuclear weapons only work when states have a will to fight a nuclear war. In the case of India and Pakistan, both states understand deterrence with their own interpretations. In nuclear strategy, 'war fighting' means willingness to use nuclear weapons not only for deterrence but for fighting a nuclear war and "the success of nuclear deterrence depends on the perceived capacity to fight a nuclear war and if the adversary is convinced that one will not use nuclear weapons either because of lack of capacity or willingness, the deterrence could fail" (Rajagopalan & Mishra 2014).

There has been a discussion on the role of nuclear weapons in bringing stability and instability to the region. Although the atomic deterrence has brought stability to the region as the war has been averted but the risk of escalation between India and Pakistan still prevails. In this connection, while Biswas (2015) considered Pakistan's low yield nuclear weapons as a threat to strategic stability, Ladwig (2015) stressed that changes in Indian conventional military doctrine have proved to be fatal for strategic stability of South Asia. Pakistan's leadership has given clear signals that low yield nuclear weapons have a vital role in Pakistan's strategic policy. Pakistan's policy of lowering nuclear threshold has the basic purpose of halting India from launching any conventional strike against it. Even though India's decision for operationalization of its CSD has led Pakistan to manufacture low yield nuclear weapons but the terrain, Pakistan's quick mobilization and lack of strategic surprise are the hurdles in the way of quick Indian military attack. It is only Indian-initiated limited war that can result in a deterrence failure (Ladwig 2015). India has been thinking of revisiting its nuclear doctrine or create options to tackle Pakistan's low yield nuclear weapons threat (Biswas 2015). The pessimists believe that Indian conventional military modernization is a serious threat to the stability present in South Asia but Ladwig (2015) seemed positive and argued that the stability still prevails in South Asia and it does not have a major threat.

The understanding of the nuclear doctrines with different orientations on the two sides is of greater concern. India thinks that its nuclear doctrine is fulfilling Indian security challenges emerging from Chinese and Pakistani nuclear doctrines. India further argues that it can go for a limited war against Pakistan under CSD . In contrast, Pakistan thinks that it will use low yield nuclear weapons against India's conventional forces in limited conventional war. India takes Pakistan's threat of low yield nuclear weapons lightly as it thinks that Pakistan will not dare for it as it will result in Indian massive nuclear retaliation on Pakistan (Saran 2013). According to Saran, limited nuclear strike is contradictory in its terms because "any nuclear exchange, once initiated, would swiftly and inexorably escalate to the strategic level" (Saran 2013: 16).

There is a need for the international community to play its role in convincing the two states to withdraw from their current positions otherwise the ultimate destruction would be the fate of this region. The US needs to play its role in resolving the disputes between the two nuclear-weapon states by bringing them to the negotiation table. In this connection, Pakistan's former Ambassador Zamir Akram said:

I am saying that the only solution for the both countries is to engage in a dialogue that will address the issues and reduce the tensions, manage the conflict, and it will resolve the problems so unless we are able to have a dialogue with each other (personal communication, Nov. 14, 2015).

To sum up, If Indian CSD has given it the capability to launch a limited conventional war against its adversary; Pakistan's low yield nuclear weapons have successfully helped stop India from opting limited conventional war against it.

## CONCLUSION

Although the space for full-fledged and limited conventional war exists between the two nuclear weapon states of India and Pakistan and the limited war can be sustained. Still, the fear factor on Indian side stops it from starting war against Pakistan. The reason behind it is 1971 war in which Pakistan was defeated and dismembered into two parts and now it is Pakistan's turn to take a revenge from India. Therefore, Indian military knows this fact that any new Indian misadventure with the intention of launching a war in the region will result in a massive response from Pakistan. This fear factor has stopped the two countries from pursuing the path of war.

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