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Pakistan's Battlefield Nuclear Weapons and the Limits of the NATO Analogy

NATO's perceived military inferiority against Warsaw Pact forces is regularly called upon to justify Pakistan's pursuit of battlefield nuclear weapons. Yet, as Jaganath Sankaran reveals, there's plenty of historical evidence to suggest that Islamabad should not rely on such weapons to keep India's military might in check.

By Jaganath Sankaran for ISN

In April 2011, Pakistan announced the latest addition to its expanding nuclear arsenal. The short-range missile, known as the Nasr, potentially offers Islamabad the ability to deliver battlefield nuclear weapons against advancing Indian forces. [i] Following another test in February of 2013, Pakistan declared that the Nasr was ready as a technology-demonstrative missile, a step below its gradual induction into the country's armed forces. [ii] Since then, prominent purveyors of Pakistani nuclear doctrine have labelled the Nasr as a counter to India's Cold Start limited war doctrine. [iii] Conceived by sections of the Indian Army and strategic community in 2004 (and still without the endorsement of New Delhi's leading policymakers), Cold Start supposedly envisions armored "integrated battle groups" making quick shallow penetrations into Pakistan and seizing territory in response to a terrorist strike involving Pakistani nationals. The seized terrain would then be used to negotiate the end of terrorist activity on Indian soil.

In addition, many proponents of the Nasr missile program often hark back to the Cold War era and compare Pakistan's current military posture vis-à-vis India with NATO's perceived military inferiority against the Warsaw Pact forces. As they see it, Pakistan's conventional forces are simply not strong enough to repel an Indian advance. Consequently, Pakistan should develop and induct battlefield nuclear weapons to prevent India from scoring a quick and relatively cheap victory with conventional forces alone. [iv] Staying with the Cold War theme, it's also perceived that the Nasr will provide Pakistan with enough 'flexible deterrence options' to implement a proportionate response [to Cold Start], rather than massive retaliation against India. [v] Yet, while Islamabad is right to be concerned about India's growing military prowess, taking a leaf out of the old NATO copybook and deploying battlefield nuclear weapons is perhaps not the most appropriate counter-measure.

A trip back in time

As the most likely site of confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, West Germany was particularly concerned about the potential use of battlefield nuclear weapons. Writing in 1962, former

Chancellor Helmut Schmidt argued that the introduction of these weapons into the European theater would destroy rather than defend Western interests. The then-West German defense minister supported this argument by claiming that “no one can prove that escalation would not take place. Everyone must assume that it could lead to thermonuclear bombardment within a few days.” Moreover, “even if the use of tactical weapons did not lead to extremes of escalation, it would nevertheless lead to the most extensive devastation of Europe and to the extensive loss of life amongst its people. And the peoples of Europe would not care whether it was tactical nuclear weapons or strategic missiles that brought about their extermination. It is utopian to hope for a mutually acceptable distinction between levels of nuclear conflict that would be sustained throughout a war.” [vi]

Research emerging from a plethora of West German institutions also supported this position. In 1971, the German Max Planck Institute conducted large-scale surveys about the effects of nuclear war on Germany. Its findings showed that using just 10 percent of NATO’s tactical nuclear weapons while sparing the highly populated areas would result in the deaths of 10 million Germans. In addition, large parts of the country would have been affected by fall-out, with a radioactive belt along the East-West border of approximately 1000 rad. It was anticipated that West Germany’s industrial capacity would decrease by 20 percent following the use of these weapons. Economic redevelopment and regeneration would only have been possible after a prolonged period of recovery and not without considerable external assistance.

According to the survey, increasing the amount of weapons expended to 20 percent, or the matching of NATO’s ten percent by the Warsaw Pact, would lead to the “political annihilation” of Germany. The Federal Republic would have lost about 20 percent of its population, 50 percent of its industry and witnessed the near-total collapse of its critical infrastructure. Rejuvenating West Germany’s industrial and agricultural sectors would have been impossible. With only a few survivors escaping the attack unscathed, the country’s social structures would also have been damaged beyond repair.

Such reports propelled a strong sense of skepticism about the utility of battlefield nuclear weapons among the West German population and, indeed, its armed forces. In 1977 and 1982, the social science institute of the *Bundeswehr* surveyed West German military officers on the use and utility of battlefield nuclear weapons. Only 33 percent of the noncommissioned officers and 48 percent of commissioned officers gave their full agreement to the statement that “The Federal Republic must be defended even if nuclear weapons have to be used on her territory.” By contrast, 73 percent of all West German enlisted personnel said that they agreed with the statement that “Nothing can justify a war in which weapons of mass destruction are used.” [vii]

Back to the future?

These are undoubtedly lessons that Pakistan should take into account before the Nasr comes fully into service. Moreover, it has also been suggested that using just one of these weapons along the major axis of approach from India into Pakistan towards the cities of Lahore and Sialkot—major theaters of battle in the 1965 war—could lead to the deaths of thousands on both sides of the heavily populated border. [viii] And while Pakistan’s leaders might assume that the mere presence of the Nasr would act as a powerful deterrent against an Indian invasion thereby precluding its use, that logic might not find purchase in the minds of counterparts in New Delhi. Indeed, senior Indian politicians have declared in the past that they would treat any use of nuclear weapons on the country’s armed forces as a strategic nuclear attack. It remains to be seen how Pakistan would manage the challenges posed by escalation.

Finally, it is also important to note that Pakistan’s current nuclear arsenal can easily be adapted for use as battlefield weapons. Missiles with longer ranges such as the Ghaznavi and Abdali can either be

launched on a lofted trajectory or their boosters terminated earlier to reach locations near the India-Pakistani border where the Nasr might eventually be deployed. In addition, Pakistan's current nuclear warheads can be made to explode in a fashion similar to battlefield low-yield nuclear weapons through pre-initiation, thereby precluding the need for the development of low-yield warheads. [ix]

Which begs the question: if the current Pakistani nuclear force is already inherently flexible enough to be deployed on the battlefield, then why is Islamabad expending precious resources on developing the Nasr? At the very least, Pakistan should desist from deploying this missile until there are clear indications that India's most senior politicians have endorsed the implementation of the Cold Start doctrine. Islamabad and New Delhi should also continue to jointly explore confidence building measures such as the redeployment of infantry forces and long-range high power artillery away from the most sensitive border areas. No need to ask what modern day Germany would recommend!

[i] See: Inter Services Public Relations, Press Release No. PR94/2011-ISPR, April 19, 2011, http://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=1721 ; and Peter Crail, "Pakistan Tests Short-Range Missile," *Arms Control Today*, May, 2011, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_05/NewsBrief4. Since then the Nasr has been tested thrice.

[ii] Sikander Shaheen, "Pakistan Successfully Test Fires Hatf-IX Missile," *The Nation*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.nation.com.pk/national/12-Feb-2013/pakistan-successfully-test-fires-hatf-ix-missile>

[iii] For details, see: Ibid; Maleeha Lodhi, "Pakistan's Nuclear Compulsions," *The News*, November 6, 2012, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-9-141314-Pakistan%E2%80%99s-nuclear-compulsions> ; Adil Sultan, "Pakistan's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Impact of Drivers and Technology on Nuclear Doctrine," http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1340000409_86108059.pdf; and Zahir Kazmi, "Nothing Tactical About Nuclear Weapons," *The Express Tribune*, May 17, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/709277/nothing-tactical-about-nuclear-weapons/>

[iv] James M. Garrett, "Nuclear Weapons for the Battlefield: Deterrent or Fantasy?," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue No. 2, 1987.

[v] Mark Fitzpatrick, "Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, London, UK, 2014, pp. 32.

[vi] Hans Gunter Brauch, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons. Neutron Weapons: A West German Perspective," in William H. Kincade and Jeffrey D. Porro (eds.), "Negotiating Security: An Arms Control Reader," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington D.C., 1979, pp. 127-131; and Helmut Schmidt, "Defense or Retaliation," *Praeger*, New York, 1962, pp. 100-102.

[vii] Daniel Charles, "Nuclear Planning in NATO: Pitfalls of First Use," *Ballinger Publishing Company*, Cambridge, MA, 1987, pp. 142.

[viii] Jaganath Sankaran, "Destroying Pakistan to Deter India? The Problem with Pakistan's Battlefield

Nukes," Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, July/August 2014.

[ix] Pre-initiation is the premature commencement of fissioning in the active material of a nuclear weapon before the degree of design supercriticality is achieved, resulting in a reduced yield. For details, see: Department of the Army and the Navy, *Staff Officers Field Manual Nuclear Weapons Employment Effects Data* (Washington D.C.: US Department of the Army and the Navy, 1968), pp. 25.

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