

Pakistan's Sea-based Nuclear Deterrence: Implications for India

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Introduction

Pakistan's desire to develop sea-based deterrence stems from its inherent insecurities and its ambition of competing with India. This race is further abetted and fuelled by its geostrategic alignment with China. Despite its aspirations, Pakistan knows its technological and financial limitations and hence, it has decided to invest in developing a Submarine Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM). Pakistan's escalatory policy of diversifying its tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) and extending them towards the sea is tremendously dangerous as it could cause a rupture in the delicate geostrategic balance. Furthermore, it is also bound to create added instability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This threat perception is intensified by China's willingness to aid and abet Pakistan's mission in order to cause complications that might dampen India's power projection. They plan to do so by developing Pakistan's nuclear trajectories and creating base facilities for their ships and submarines in Pakistani bases, thus spreading a pervasive Chinese influence through the IOR.

To provide a little context, Pakistan's nuclear trajectory began in the 1970s, and since then it has endeavoured to expand and diversify its nuclear arsenal. According to the report by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists (November 2016), Pakistan has a nuclear weapons stockpile of 130-140 warheads and have plans to increase its arsenal further.¹ This number may grow to about 220-250 by 2025, making it the fifth largest nuclear weapons state globally. This paper tries to analyse Pakistan's nuclear policies – particularly its sea based nuclear deterrence – in a changing global environment, and its implications for India.

Pakistan's Nuclear Strategy

Nuclear weapons have been an intrinsic part of the Pakistani military strategy since the time Pakistan declared itself a nuclear weapon State. These weapons form the fundamental core of their

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strategy and the primary principle behind this shift has been Pakistan's assumption that any threat or inequality can be countered through nuclear weapons.² Pakistan's threat perception is India centric and its military strategies have thus revolved around, (a) the acquirement of advanced technologies to seek a competitive edge; (b) alignment with major powers mainly the US and China and (c) the continuation and commentary of its asymmetric warfare and nuclear blackmail.³ Historically, Pakistan knew that technologically and economically it lags behind India, and therefore, it adopted the policy of aligning with major powers like the US initially, and then China in order to get economic aid and military weapons. Pakistan considers an 'aggressive, bigger and conventionally superior India', a challenge, hence terrorism and 'proxy war' are tools that have been adopted to "bleed India through a thousand cuts". They believe that their propagandistic threat of the usage of nuclear weapons has lowered the nuclear threshold and prevented India from taking any punitive action. The Pakistani nuclear strategy of "First Use" is specifically India centric. Lieutenant General Lodhi has stated in the Pakistan Defence Journal, *"In a deteriorating military situation when an Indian conventional attack is likely to break through our defence or has already breached the main defence line causing a major setback to the defences which cannot be restored by conventional means at our disposal, the government would be left with no option except to use nuclear weapons to stabilise the situation. India's superiority in conventional arms and manpower would have to be offset by nuclear weapons.....Pakistan's nuclear doctrine would, therefore, essentially revolve around the first strike option. In other words, we will use nuclear weapons if attacked by India even if the attack is with conventional weapons."*⁴

Pakistan's Nuclear Policy Changes

Over the years Pakistan has become more confident about its nuclear policy and the handling of its nuclear arsenals. They have brought to the fore the defensive concept of 'Minimum Credible Deterrence' with the objective of depicting Pakistan as a responsible nuclear weapon state. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has also stated that 'nuclear restraint, stabilisation and minimum credible deterrence constitute the basic elements of Pakistan's Nuclear Policy'.⁵ Since then, Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai, the erstwhile head of the Strategic Planning Division, commented in Pakistan,

*“nuclear weapons would be used only if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake”.*⁶ As evinced by this statement, a few red lines or thresholds under which nuclear weapons can be used have been declared for the first time. Nevertheless within the subcontinent, at least Pakistan maintains that with respect to India, its propagandistic “First Use” policy remains very much in force. In order to be able to implement such a threat they have been working on the improvement and diversification of their nuclear force structures. Pakistani interlocutors have also begun highlighting the need to develop more aspects of their nuclear strategy such as ‘full spectrum deterrence’ or building deterrence ‘at all levels of the threat spectrum’/‘flexible deterrence options.’⁷ It is in this policy of ‘full spectrum response’ that the Pakistanis have thought of developing TNWs, both for the land and sea, leading to an increase in the number of nuclear weapons that they own. The futility of their current ‘first strike’ model has made them recalibrate their position and deliberate the possibility of developing their triad. This investment is most evident particularly in the third leg of the triad which is ‘Sea-based Deterrence’.

Pakistan’s Sea-based Deterrence

Three vectors have been responsible for making them consider the possibility of sea-based deterrence. Firstly, India’s second strike capabilities, which could potentially be used as a retaliatory attack, thus negate their “First Use”. Furthermore, India’s long range ballistic missiles and its ability to target the entire Pakistani landmass adds to this threat of a believable retaliatory second strike and serves to increase their agitation. The second factor is India’s acquirement of the Nuclear Powered Submarine (SSN) from Russia and our subsequent efforts at the development of indigenous nuclear submarines. Finally, the third vector motivating them towards sea-based deterrence is China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation, and the Chinese endeavour to build on Pakistani naval capabilities, in order to counter the predominant Indian influence in the IOR.

Pakistan’s proclivity to align with major powers globally has reaped good benefits. In the initial years they were able to systematically receive requisite armaments from the US, and the US refused to take cognisance of Pakistan nuclear programme and the proliferation issues. After the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962,

Pakistan turned towards China with the aim of furthering its nuclear programme. The Pakistani nuclear programme was fundamentally possible solely because of Chinese help. All the aspects of their current arsenal, ranging from delivery vehicles to reactors have Chinese imprints on them, and the same is now being done with their naval nuclear assets. As has been historically proven, Pakistan is primarily fixated on finding the means required to circumvent Indian superiority. This is evinced by their military strategisation, wherein they endeavour to counter conventional Indian superiority with nuclear weapons. Similarly, they use the implementation of TNWs as a retaliatory mechanism against the Indian Cold Start doctrine. This last attempt at developing their nuclear triad is also a directly reflective response aimed at countering and opposing Indian sea-based deterrence through the development of a modified version of a nuclear-capable *Babur-3* SLCM. What needs to be noted in particular is the fact that the land version of the *Babur* cruise has been reverse engineered from the American *Tomahawk* by the Chinese. Therefore, the Chinese intent driving the development of Pakistan's nuclear trajectory is self-evident and self-explanatory and will continue in future too.

Pakistan had established the Naval Strategic Force Command in 2012 in order to focus on developing sea-based deterrence capabilities. Furthermore, in order to make the deterrence credible, and to have a sufficient number of submarines, Pakistan once again turned to its trusted old friend and supplier China, who will now provide the Pakistan Navy with eight modified diesel-electric attack submarines by 2028. According to *IHS Jane's Fighting Ships*, the Type 041 *Yuan*-class is "a diesel electric attack submarine (SSK), potentially with Stirling air-independent propulsion, that is armed with YJ-2 (YJ-82) anti-ship missiles and a combination of Yu-4 (SAET-50) passive homing and Yu-3 (SET-65E) active/passive homing torpedoes, and is supposed to be the quietest submarine in the People's Liberation Army (Navy) inventory."⁸ Additionally, in 2016, Pakistan also unveiled a very low frequency (VLF) communication facility (aimed at enabling it to communicate with deployed submarines) and according to an official news release by the military's Inter Services Public Relations media branch, the VLF facility is at a new base, PNS *Hameed*, near Pakistan's main port of Karachi, and is the first of its kind in the country.⁹ Recently,

Pakistan had also announced that it has successfully carried out the first-ever test of its nuclear-capable *Babur-3* SLCM from a submerged platform. *Babur-3* has a range of 450 km and is capable of nuclear payload delivery. Once this is finally developed and operationalised the advantage they believe they may have is that “*Babur-3* will enhance the survivability of its second strike forces. Therefore, Pakistan is working towards the development of a doctrine through which they can afford to have a less forward-leaning posture with its land-based tactical nuclear forces. This is primarily because Pakistani military planners will have less reason to fear the “use it or lose it” dilemma at the start of a conflict with India – and should contribute to strategic stability and may not require its planning to necessarily prepare for the early use of lower-order nuclear options.”¹⁰

Simultaneously, one needs to keep an eye on Pakistan’s infrastructural development as well. One such major development which is often overlooked is the Jinnah Naval Base at Ormara, in Baluchistan, situated 350 km west of Karachi and 285 km east of the Gwadar Port. This is an important tactical base which has become fully operationalised. Aside from being an essential geographical asset, this naval base has also enhanced the Pakistan Navy’s strategic reach in the West Coast right up to the Strait of Hormuz. The fact that it will also have a submarine base and is connected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) implies that this would be especially beneficial for the Chinese, as they can use this base in the future for dual purposes, both for logistics and for enhancing their strategic reach.¹¹ This base also has the facility to repair ships and submarines. The fact that Chinese submarines and support vessels have been berthed in these ports goes to prove that the focus on support infrastructure for strategic platforms is also being developed which will further aid Pakistan strategically in due course, as they will have the infrastructure ready for its strategic naval assets. Furthermore, in the future, this base might be developed as an alternative or rather an extension of the Karachi Port. Thus Pakistan, like countries across the world, is trying to mould its geostrategic power nexus to its advantage by diversifying its assets and thereby intensifying its deterrent capabilities. The speed with which Pakistan is developing its naval infrastructure is a testimony to the fact that the naval wing which had been hitherto neglected in the past has taken precedence over the two other Services for now.¹²

Implications for India

The Indian Navy has played a significant role in previous conflicts against Pakistan. It continues to maintain its superiority in terms of operations and strategic assets. The naval modernisation and indigenous building of ships, submarines and other paraphernalia required to maintain a credible deterrence continues. India joining the Missile Technological Control Regime (MTCR) has further eased the procurement of technologies. However, several theorists believe that Pakistan's development of its sea-based tactical nuclear assets is going to impact the situation in the IOR. The question that arises therefore is; whether Pakistan's SLCM in future can hamper Indian naval submarine capabilities, the way Pakistani's deployment of TNWs on land constrained the Indian Army's retaliatory capabilities. Some theorists believe that nuclear tipped tactical cruise missiles can damage both, the adversary's counter force as well as counter value targets more lethally than conventional torpedoes. Further, the conundrum that emerges is whether a kill chain should be engaged given that the enemy could potentially be carrying dual missile technologies. Theorists believe that decision making problems in conflict situations might emerge as Indian Navy might be unable to come to a decision regarding whether or not they should attack Pakistani conventional submarines that might potentially have the requisite capabilities to carry dual missiles. Nevertheless, other military strategists have suggested that during a state of war, a submarine will engage in a kill strike irrespective of the adversary's dual missile potential. The last year Uri strikes have to a large extent nullified Pakistan's propaganda of TNWs. Similarly, its sea-based assets could be more for the purpose of survivability than for attack purposes. Still, given the geostrategic volatility it is essential that India modernise its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities and other sea-based nuclear assets so that it can continue to maintain its credible deterrence.

In conclusion, it could be said that just as TNWs on land had created dilemmas for Pakistan, similarly SLCM trajectory is also going to create more problems for them. There will be command and control problems, since nuclear capable cruise missiles have to be launch-ready prior to departure from port. There is also a lot of concern regarding whether or not Pakistan will be able to put fail-safe safety protocols and personnel reliability programmes in place.¹³ Furthermore, Pakistan is also a hub/breeding ground for terrorist groups and aside from the dangers of the loss of command

and control there is also an increased risk of theft, sabotage, accidental launches and escalatory conflicts. There is a need for Pakistan therefore, to re-examine the complexities of its nuclear doctrine and whether these assets are going to create more vulnerabilities; and if so, are the risks worth the payoffs that might accompany the deterrence benefits of a questionably survivable platform in a shooting war.¹⁴

While it is true that India is geographically, economically and militarily stronger than Pakistan, it still needs to keep track of the latter's movements in order to effectively counter aggressive strategic posturing. It needs to develop its ASW capabilities in order to protect its assets and prevent its adversaries from striking strategic counter value targets.

Conclusion

Pakistan is slowly but surely envisioning a greater role for its Navy not only in terms of the IOR but also in terms of securing its sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) along the West Coast. It is using its strategic location for the twin purpose of countering Indian forces while also enhancing its reach to the extremities of West Asia. Given these geostrategic advantages, Pakistan is leaving no stone unturned in its mission to develop its naval assets in terms of warheads as well as infrastructure. Furthermore, China on its part is ready to support Pakistan in all its technological domains purportedly for the benefits they might accrue from that relationship. China is aware that given the geostrategic pivot against India, Pakistan will oblige in any way possible and provide logistical support to Chinese ships and submarines. Gwadar has already been leased to Chinese companies and the extremely important port of Ormara is being connected to the CPEC. A two front war on land has always been a prevalent threat hanging over the Indian subcontinent. But there is reason to believe that this collusive threat may manifest itself through the sea in the coming decades. Given Pakistan's development of its naval arsenal and China's naval modernisation schemes – particularly its efforts in building more aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines – the shifting dynamics of geostrategic interaction need to be watched with interest. The three major problems that might stunt India's ability to counter such an attack are complacency and overconfidence, infrastructural and procurement delays and bureaucratic obfuscation. Delaying defence projects and a systematic stalling of defense infrastructural engagement are dangerous tendencies

that need to be avoided if India's current superiority is to be maintained. The current power balance in the region is tilted towards India, but to maintain this, India needs to take proactive actions. Constant vigilance against enemy manoeuvres and adopting appropriate modernisation trends is, therefore, the clarion call of the hour.

Endnotes

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¹⁴ Op. Cit. 10.