

# Limited Wars and Deterrence in Nuclear Age

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## Abstract

*Deterrence meant different things to different people at different times. Disagreement on the meaning of deterrence led to divergent interpretations. However, since the challenge which deterrence seeks to answer is capable of assuming different forms, the concept of deterrence too has unavoidably assumed different roles. Defined in simple words, deterrence means providing unmistakable evidence of retaliatory capacity to the enemy with a view to deterring him from initiating any military move for gains. It operates as the "skillful non-use of military forces". General Beaufre said:*

*"The object of deterrence is to prevent an enemy power taking the decision when faced with a given situation to act or react in the light of the existence of a set of dispositions which constitute an effective threat. The result, which it is desired to achieve, is therefore a psychological one and it is sought by means of a threat."*

*The psychological result is achieved through a combined effect of calculation of the risk, in relation to the stakes involved, the fear produced by the risks of nuclear war and consequent uncertainty following the war. In the first place, the enemy must be communicated an unambiguous threat of retaliation telling him that it would cause greater loss to him than any gains he might desire through resort to arms. There could be a policy statement by a responsible member of the government, like*

*that of “massive retaliation”, or it could even be just a bluff. However, whether it is a serious and meaningful policy-statement or it is only rhetoric to frighten the other side, the chances are that the enemy would make discreet probing to assess how far he could go without inviting riposte. Therefore, it is essential to invest the threat with an air of credibility.*

## **Introduction**

**T**he two World Wars depicted a total conflict designed to impose

the state's will on its adversary in an absolute manner, with intention to occupy the entire territory and destruction of its political centre of power. It invariably entailed unconditional surrender as the projected end-state. Nuclear weapons pushed the scale of destruction to such a horrific level that the use of such weapons in a situation of symmetry became almost akin to suicide. This in turn led to major restraints upon the scope and scale of war fighting. Exhausted by the Second World War, United States of America (USA) initially opted for a strategy of “Massive-Response or Massive Retaliation”. It threatened to unleash its nuclear arsenal upon the Soviet Union, if it ever crossed the trip wire in Europe. As the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity, the United States (US) threat of massive retaliation became less credible. By the time of Cuban crisis, its credibility had been dangerously eroded. After Cuba, war fighting regressed to the form of prolonged Low Intensity Conflicts or “Guerrilla Warfare”. This took place in Vietnam where the USA faced a traumatic defeat. Soviet Union drained its economic resources in a brutal guerrilla war in Afghanistan, which hastened the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. It ended the Cold War and ushered in the era of unipolarity with the USA as the sole superpower.

## **Limited War in the Second Nuclear Age**

As has been stated by Paul Brakcen, the second nuclear age really began with India's peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974. Today, Asia has six indigenous nuclear powers - Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. Iran is struggling to become the seventh nuclear power. How different are the "Limited Wars" in the second nuclear age from the first? There are significant parallels that are visible in the Indo-Pak nuclear dyad. Micheal Krepon has highlighted that in the year immediately after nuclearisation, the nuclear balance is unclear since tolerance thresholds and red lines have not been defined.<sup>1</sup> The following needs to be highlighted :-

- (a) In the first nuclear era of the Cold War the Soviet Union went nuclear in 1949 and the major limited war in Korea broke out in 1950.
- (b) In the second nuclear age, India and Pakistan went nuclear in 1998 and the Kargil conventional conflict broke out in 1999 (exactly a year later).
- (c) Low Intensity conflict broke out in a significant way in Jammu and Kashmir in 1990 - the year Pakistan first tested its nuclear weapon at Lop Nor under Chinese aegis.
- (d) The fear of escalation prevented a conventional conflict at the time of Operation Parakram in 2001-02. Conventional military parity more than nuclear parity severely constrained India's response options.
- (e) The concept of deterrence, therefore, acquires criticality in the context of limited wars.

### **Limited Wars**

Since the peace talks at Postdam, at the end of the Second World War, a bewildering number of wars have been fought. Nuclear weapons have neither made wars obsolete nor have they even reduced their frequency. What they have done is to limit their scope and objectives and confine the use of arms to conventional weapons. However, with greater proliferation of nuclear weapons, the possibility of the use of tactical nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. Captain BH Liddel Hart said, "To the extent it (H-bomb) reduces the likelihood of all-out war, it increases the possibilities

of 'Limited Wars' pursued by indirect and widespread local aggression".<sup>2</sup> The United States waged the Korean War under the United Nations banner and so exasperated did she feel at the irritating limitations of this war that she proclaimed, that in future she would unleash "massive retaliation" in a similar situation. There has been no dearth of provoking situations since Korea but, except for the Cuban affair in 1962, the United States did not even remotely hint at the possibility of using nuclear weapons.

In Vietnam, although the United States mounted aerial attacks of unprecedented magnitude on military installations around key North Vietnamese cities like Hanoi and Haiphong, yet in spite of mounting casualties and cost and ever-increasing enemy guerrilla activities, which made the Vietnam War the bloodiest and the costliest ever fought by the United States, she did not use nuclear weapons.

**Definition.** A limited war<sup>03</sup> is a localised conflict in which the military resources committed for waging it are voluntarily and deliberately limited. The major powers usually fight such wars through proxy but sometimes come out openly to fight on behalf of, or in aid of, one of the local parties without, however, carrying the conflict to their own homelands. Long-range "strategic" weapons, if used, are confined to the conventional use of aircraft for hitting limited number of military targets. The conflict is restrained by awareness of the destruction of an uncontrolled war which it is feared, would inevitably lead to mutual annihilation. It is a process of bargaining through a test of resolve, designed to wear down the opposite side. The aim is to pressurise the enemy and to compel him to come to the conference table for peace talks and cessation of hostilities.

The limitations which restrict the "limited wars" are not the factors which, in any case, would restrict the war due to the non-availability of war material for waging such a war. There is a difference between the local wars and limited wars. The local wars involving countries depending for their arms on more developed countries may remain limited for want of adequate arms to wage the war beyond a limit. Pointing out the difference between the local wars and limited wars, the Soviet military writers said that the

local war is limited in the geographical extent and in the weapons used.

Limited war, in the context of nuclear strategy, is one in which power possessing unlimited destructive nuclear capacity, voluntarily restricts itself to the use of conventional weapons in the conflict in which they are directly or indirectly involved. In the Vietnam War, the United States voluntarily abstained from the use of nuclear weapons but used strategic bombing on a wide scale.

Limited wars involving two nuclear powers, whose deterrence capabilities have acquired credibility, will be protracted wars of nerves and wits from which no party would emerge victorious. These wars would be inconclusive, long-drawn, seesaw battles requiring extraordinary patience to wait for a suitable climate for starting peace talks. A sense of mounting exasperation may often make the temptation to use non-conventional weapons to end the war look almost irresistible, but the knowledge that nuclear birds could come home to roost would act as a restraint.

"There is no substitute for victory", asserted General Douglas. The active military career in field of these great soldiers ended unpleasantly. It is remarkable, how like the Bourbon kings of the ancient regime of France, who had learned nothing and forgotten nothing, the most brilliant military men of our times had learnt nothing from changed circumstances. A decade and a half after the glorious career of MacArthur was promptly ended by his dismissal for upholding a doctrine which was considered too dangerous to be implemented, General Westmoreland met similar, if not exactly the same, fate for similar reasons.

What is amazing is that the lessons of Korea were analysed and learnt by the political and military leaders of the time with a view to avoiding similar pitfalls in future, and yet, the Vietnamese war was fought, and it did not produce better results. The agreement on Korea was a compromise, not entirely to the liking of either party.

There is no victory in limited wars unless the objectives are achieved in the opening rounds of the conflict. Deitchman said, *"It would appear from the data on conventional limited wars that for the successful side, objectives must be clearly understood and*

*achieved with extreme rapidity. The other alternatives, resulting from inconclusive military action, appear to be escalation or an agreement, probably tacit, to settle by negotiation for limited gains. And the best that can be achieved may be a little better than the status quo ante, with the added material and political costs of the war, for both sides".<sup>4</sup>*

### **Lessons Learnt**

One of the major lessons of Vietnam War can be summarised as, "Limited war ends inconclusively, without victory to any side, on a note of compromise in which objectives are only partly realised. Determination to carry on the struggle endlessly despite suffering grievous losses and psychological effect play on the nerves of the adversary and may confer marginal gains".

### **Evolution of the Concept of Deterrence**

Ten years after the end of the Cold War, there was a conviction that nuclear weapons were just instruments of deterrence. Nuclear wars cannot be won; hence, must not be fought to bring civilisation to an end and billions of people killed or maimed. Einstein knew how the nuclear weapons could mean catastrophe. He said, "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones".

Dipankar Banerjee had argued that deterrence has been a fundamental part of military doctrine through the ages. It has relied essentially on two basic principles. One is through the threat of punishment. This is borne out of a belief that if another nation carries out a hostile act, it will be visited by a sure and devastating response. Offensive forces held in reserve are meant to enforce this threat. The other is through dissuasion or denial. This implies that the action a hostile nation plans to take would be so difficult and certain to be defeated that it would not be worth the effort.

According to Bharat Karnad, "The nuclear tests, at the very least, reflect India's disillusionment with self-denial and the power of moral caution". Finding complete contradiction between weaponisation and continued urge for disarmament, Karnad opines, "Delhi hangs on to the vestiges of the past by conjoining it's imperative to weaponise with the sentimental craving to advance disarmament. This is a somewhat quixotic and contrarian

effort, especially in a milieu where military power is the fulcrum of international diplomacy. Delhi seems convinced that nuclear weapons will help shove the world towards 'total disarmament' without first examining whether this has the remotest chance of succeeding.

If we accept that national security is guaranteed by nuclear deterrence, we cannot forcefully seek nuclear disarmament, yet maintaining a deterrent has been described as the 'central anomaly in the Indian policy'. In realistic military terms, the two objectives are the two ends of the pole. Though the disarmament element of India's foreign policy predates the country's nuclear weapon capability, yet once we have acquired the weapons we must give up Nehru's moral politic device and replace it by the present real politic approach. India has proclaimed itself to be nuclear weapon state. For such a country, nuclear disarmament would be counter-productive policy.

### **Conclusion**

Minimum credible nuclear deterrence is a vital element of India's nuclear doctrine. Although, the essential elements of evolving nuclear doctrine were formally announced by Prime Minister Vajpayee in August 1998, the concept of deterrence was recognised much before the Vajpayee Government assumed office. The minimum deterrence is the national policy, and has to be kept above party politics. Once India conducted its first Pokhran test in 1974, and the fact that China was already a nuclear weapon state and Pakistan had already initiated its nuclear programme in 1972, it had become unavoidable for India to develop a minimum deterrence. The Vajpayee government, as the Prime Minister himself said, only became instrument of implementation of the country policy in its national interest.

Reaffirming India's commitment to build a small but credible nuclear arsenal (as deterrence), Prime Minister Vajpayee rejected the unreasonable external demands to limit the nation's capabilities. He asserted, in December 1998, that India's decisions on its nuclear policy are sovereign functions, not subject for negotiations. Reiterating that India's nuclear doctrine would be centered on two basic ideas – building of a minimum but credible

deterrent and the no-first-use of nuclear weapons – Mr Vajpayee explained the operational implication of these ideas.

He said that India would deploy its nuclear assets 'in a manner that ensures survivability and capacity of an adequate response', thus, rejecting foreign power's demand to limit India's nuclear capability. The Government of India made it clear that it was determined to have a minimum, though credible, deterrence in the interest of security, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Micheal Krepon & Chris Gagne, *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia*, Henry L. Stimson Centre Book, Indian Ed. By Vision India, New Delhi. 2003. p.48.

<sup>2</sup> BH Liddel Hart, "Strategy", Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1962, p.17

<sup>3</sup> It was General George Marshall who for the first time used the term "limited war" conspicuously in May 1951 in the hearings before the Senate Committees on the Armed Services and on foreign relations concerning the military situation in the Far East. Asked by Senator Cain as to how would he characterize the Korean Conflict-whether he would call it a police action or a war, large or small-General Marshall said, "I would characterize it as a limited war which I hope will remain limited." (*Military Situation in the Far East*. p.610)

<sup>4</sup> Seymour J Deitchman, "*Limited War and American Defence Policy*", MJ T Press, Massachusetts, 1964. p.31

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