

Pakistan Nuclear Rhetoric: From 0 To 2750

Giving a Special Message at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad on 24 May 2023, to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear test Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai (Retd) provided a new insight into Pakistan's otherwise ambiguous nuclear doctrine. What General Kidwai says matters because he is currently an Advisor to Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA), which controls Research and Development and all other policy matters concerning nuclear weapons. He has a deep association with Pakistan's nuclear programme as he founded the Strategic Plans Division (SPD) which he headed for nearly fourteen years, and has been the central figure overseeing the development and expansion of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal for the past twenty-five years.

Iqbal Malhotra in his remarkable book, 'The Mullah and The Poppies: A Tale of Deception' has very clearly brought out how Pakistan's nuclear programme benefitted immensely from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the West was compelled to turn a blind eye towards the Pakistan's ambitious nuclear programme. Surprisingly General Kidwai admitted to this during his talk and said, "Allah was clearly on our side when he provided breathing space to Pakistan's nuclear programme when USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 as international focus on Pakistan's nuclear progress was pushed to the background".

Expanded Scope of Pakistan Nuclear Policy

During his address, he reiterated some of the long-standing positions of Pakistan's nuclear policy, such as the strength of its nuclear triad based on Land, Air, and Sea-based capabilities to deter India. He also discussed full-spectrum deterrence that is both horizontal and vertical deterrence.

In his words, full-spectrum deterrence "comprises horizontally of a robust Tri-Services inventory of a variety of nuclear weapons ... [that] is held on land with the Army Strategic Force Command, the ASFC; at sea with the Naval Strategic Force Command, the NSFC; and in the air with the Air Force Strategic Command, the AFSC."^[i]

Vertical deterrence covers strategic, operational and tactical ranges. However, what stood out in his statement was that "vertically the spectrum encapsulates adequate range coverage from 0 meters to 2,750 kilometers as well as nuclear weapons destructive yields at three tiers—strategic, operational, and tactical."^[ii]

Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD)

While articulating FSD, General Kidwai talked of possession of "full spectrum of nuclear weapons in all three categories — strategic, operational and tactical, with full range coverage of the large Indian land mass and its outlying territories".

The second element he said was that Pakistan possesses an "entire range of weapons in yield coverage and the numbers to deter the adversary's pronounced policy of massive retaliation". He explained that this implies that "counter-massive retaliation punishment will be as severe if not more".

The third aspect was about the “liberty of choosing from a full spectrum of targets, in a target rich India notwithstanding the Ballistic Missile Defence, to include counter-value, counter-force, and battlefield” targets.^[iii]

FSD was approved by Pakistan’s National Command Authority at its meeting on 05 Sept 2013. The policy was developed in response to India’s war fighting concepts of ‘Cold Start’ and Pro- Active Operations (PAO) to provide a range of options to the decision-makers.

Implications of Minimum Range

Reducing the minimum range to Zero meters is unprecedented and points to a major shift in Islamabad’s nuclear policy thinking. Zero-range weapons suggests that Pakistan is either going to develop frontline weapons with yields as low as a fraction of a kiloton—or Pakistan could possibly lay nuclear land mines across the border to deter any offensive. ^[iv]

However, this statement does not provide any details of the existing scientific research and design testing. Keeping with the spirit of ambiguity, there is unlikely to be a follow-up soon to clear the air. Pakistan has always kept its nuclear policy vague and deliberately ambiguous; its missile ranges are the only aspect that has always been announced publicly through after every missile test.

General Kidwai’s statement, does not divulge whether the zero-range announcement refers to a technical milestone in Pakistan’s nuclear development or is a rhetorical escalation.^[v]

Prior to Kidwai’s statement, the officially announced lowest range in Pakistan’s nuclear inventory was the Nasr, or Hatf-9 ballistic missile, with a range of 60 kilometers. The solid-fuelled tactical ballistic missile first test fired in 2011 was projected to be a response to India’s Cold Start doctrine. Had received huge flak for its potential security risks and command and control challenges.^[vi]

The upper limit of 2,750 kilometers refers to the land-based surface-to-surface medium-range ballistic missile Shaheen-3, which was first test-fired in 2015 with the stated aim to reach the Indian islands of Andaman and Nicobar, thereby denying New Delhi the strategic bases for a potential second-strike capability. The upper limit was restricted to 2,750 kilometers to signal that Pakistan’s nuclear missile program is only India-specific and does not pose a threat to any other country in the region and beyond.

The bigger question is what strategic objective Pakistan wishes to achieve by going below the already controversial 60-kilometer range to zero-range weapons. As FSD is aimed at plugging the perceived gaps in Pakistan’s deterrence posture, the apparent announcement of a zero-range policy seems to have been developed in response to a growing perception that India’s 2019 airstrikes on Balakot had called Pakistan’s nuclear bluff.^[vii]

While defending Nasr’s development and its role in nuclear planning, Pakistani officials have often contended that use of any nuclear weapons on the battlefield would have strategic consequences. While this position might have allayed Western concerns regarding Pakistan’s attempt to lower the nuclear threshold, it may also have inadvertently made the use of Nasr less than credible.^[viii]

Quid Pro Quo Plus

On 06 February 2020 while speaking at the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London General Kidwai chose Latin a language not commonly used except by the Holy See he articulated Pakistan's declared policy by stating "Quid Pro Quo Plus". [\[ix\]](#)

During his talk, he stated that "Pakistan must shoulder the responsibility of maintaining the vital strategic balance in the conventional and nuclear equation with India as the critical determinant of the state of strategic stability in South Asia". The strategic imbalances as per him had always been created by India to which Pakistan had always responded appropriately. [\[x\]](#)

He then dwelt upon the measures taken by Pakistan, while countering these. The details listed were the first use of rudimentary nuclear deterrence along with quickly counter mobilising their conventional force during Exercise Brass Tacks. The second measure was the response to the Pokhran tests in May 98, which were followed up by Pakistan carrying out its own tests and declaring itself as a nuclear weapon state. Incidentally, 28 May, the day Pakistan detonated its first nuclear device is celebrated as "the Day of Greatness", and the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had stated on 30 May 98, "We have settled the score."

Pakistan's response to Balakot, according to him was shooting down two Indian aircraft and deliberately precision bombing an area close to where India Commanders were visiting with the aim of not causing any physical casualties. As the memory of the event is still clear in everyone's mind, we know how far removed from reality this statement was. [\[xi\]](#)

He also stated that Pakistan will not allow any "no new normal to prevail" and will always seek to maintain status quo ante. This is important for it clearly brings out that they will continue to maintain their revisionist policy and support terrorism. They feel that large scale wars are in the past and being well aware of the disparity in the conventional forces between the two nations their focus is on increasing their nuclear arsenal. [\[xii\]](#)

Imran Khan the then Pakistan Prime Minister had threatened nuclear war over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act at the First Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in December 2019 and had earlier mentioned the same while referring to removal of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, while speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019. The Indian response was appropriate, by calling it brinkmanship and not statesmanship. [\[xiii\]](#)

Pakistan's Predicament

Pakistan today is destabilised to a large degree by both its internal and external situation. Internally, apart from the numerous fault lines existing and the challenges being faced by religious fundamentalists and their proxies their main institutions have developed cracks which are visible. There is turbulence in the political space and the Army and of course the economy is in tatters.

Externally for them India remains the paramount threat and the rise in India's global stature and importance in the global strategic space wherein it is being wooed by world leaders across the globe, buoyancy in the economy, the capacity and capability building that is taking place are all matters of concern. The Indian Armed Forces which are modernising, and adding to their technological capabilities have demonstrated their resolve while standing up to China at Galwan. All these point to a growing conventional asymmetry the gulf of which is constantly

widening. They are also worried that our Ballistic Missile Defence will place India's critical strategic targets outside Pakistan capability to destroy them. The growing differential is what is worrying and leading to a feeling of isolation particularly as terrorism as an instrument of state policy has been checked to a large degree.

Hence General Kidwai chose this platform for strategic signalling to reassure the people of Pakistan that the possession of nuclear weapons by Pakistan remain important and they not only pose a credible threat to India but are also capable in ensuring the security of the nation.

At the same time, it is a signal to India that there is no place for a conventional war under a nuclear overhang and it has closed the window of any future surgical strikes as was witnessed during Balakot. They are stating that they have no option other than escalating a conflict with nuclear weapons and that nuclear deterrence is now inbuilt at every level; tactical, operational and strategic.

By constantly developing nuclear weapons which they know they cannot use and a conventional Army that has failed to win any War, Pakistan has chosen the path of relying on the use of terrorism under the nuclear umbrella as its stated policy for achieving its strategic goals. The sword and shield strategy is what they feel will give them security, the sword being terrorism and the strategic shield being nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

Strategic stability does not only hinge on nuclear weapons and deterrence, but is based on all elements of national power. As a responsible and mature nation, we should not let the nuclear bluff by our adversary deter us from instituting measures and taking appropriate action for safeguarding our national interests and values when it is necessary.

To quote Brigadier Arun Saghal (Retd); "we should be prepared with our own response mechanism to deal with any such situation created for us on the borders and that Pakistan remains highly unsatisfied with the rapidly improving situation in Kashmir".

India remains a responsible nuclear power and our doctrine of no first use with massive retaliation causing unacceptable damage puts the onus of India's reaction on the player who initiates the first step.

The principal takeaway from history to remember is that 'a nuclear conflict that cannot be won, cannot be fought'.

Endnotes

[i] Speech by Lt. Gen. (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor, National Command Authority and former DG SPD, on 25th Youme-e-Takbeer, ISSI, May 26, 2023 <https://issi.org.pk/speech-by-lt-gen-ret-d-khalid-kidwai-advisor-national-command-authority-and-former-dg-spd-on-25th-youme-e-takbeer/>

[ii] Sitara Noor, Did Pakistan Just Overhaul Its Nuclear Doctrine? , Foreign Policy, 19 June 2023 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/19/pakistan-india-nuclear-weapons-zero-range-cold-start-doctrine/>

[iii] Speech by Lt. Gen. (Retd) Khalid Kidwai, Advisor, National Command Authority and former DG SPD, on 25th Youme-e-Takbeer, ISSI, May 26, 2023 <https://issi.org.pk/speech-by-lt-gen-ret-d-khalid-kidwai-advisor-national-command-authority-and-former-dg-spd-on-25th-youme-e-takbeer/>

[iv] Sitara Noor, Did Pakistan Just Overhaul Its Nuclear Doctrine? , Foreign Policy, 19 June 2023 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/19/pakistan-india-nuclear-weapons-zero-range-cold-start-doctrine/>

[v] Ibid

[vi] Ibid

[vii] Ibid

[viii] ibid

[ix] Seventh IISS-Centre for International Strategic Studies (CISS) (Pakistan) Workshop on ‘South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control’, 6 February 2020, IISS, London <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/events/2020/transcript-of-lt-general-kidwais-keynote-address-as-delivered---iiss-ciiss-workshop-6feb20.pdf>

[x] Ibid

[xi] ibid

[xii] Ibid

[xiii] Julian Borger & Azhar Farooq, Imran Khan warns UN of potential nuclear war in Kashmir, The Guardian, 26 September 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/26/imran-khan-warns-un-of-potential-nuclear-war-in-kashmir>

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