

Contra Massive Retaliation: Possible Trajectories of a Flexible Response Deterrent Strategy for India

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ABSTRACT

The extant scholarship on India's nuclear doctrine, while problematising the credibility deficit in the strategy of massive retaliation, fails to provide a policy alternative. This study examines the alternative of flexible response available for India and makes an assessment of whether it provides a solution to this problem in India's nuclear doctrine. Even when flexible response is often cited in India's strategic circles as a likely alternative, the contours of such a strategy have hardly been deliberated. This paper seeks to develop the concept of flexible response as India confronts a rapidly changing strategic environment. It charts out the various parameters on which an alternative nuclear doctrine of flexible response can potentially be based. However, such a policy-shift must correspond with India's deterrence objectives and its nuclear wherewithal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Is India's nuclear deterrent strategy of 'massive retaliation' credible? Various experts not only from India have critiqued the strategy on a number of factors, saying that it lacks credibility. These criticisms are based on an interpretation of the strategy as a threat of nuclear retaliation against population and industrial centres using strategic nuclear weapons. However, there are a number of reasons why New Delhi is unlikely to follow up on such a threat. First, some have argued

that the policy of targeting civilians with nuclear weapons in response to a tactical use of nuclear weapon by an adversary in battlefield is inhumane. Second, the burden of escalation of nuclear conflict from tactical to strategic levels involving an all-out nuclear war will fall solely on India under this strategy. Third, and perhaps the most important reason, is that a massive nuclear response by India would invite retaliation on a similar scale and nature from Pakistan; no civilian government in New Delhi will be willing to bear such costs. India's strategy of massive retaliation therefore does not appear to be credible enough.

Exploiting this credibility-deficit vis-a-vis India's massive retaliation strategy, Pakistan has adopted a first use policy and has lowered its nuclear threshold by introducing tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs). Because of perceptions that New Delhi would not follow up on its threat of massive retaliation against, say, a first use of a TNW by Pakistan on Indian soldiers in Pakistan's own territory, Rawalpindi has managed to apparently deter India from launching a variety of conventional attacks. This 'instability-instability' paradox, to use the words of Paul Kapur, allows Pakistan to continue its proxy war against India while blocking the latter's ability to punish Pakistan through conventional means.¹

Analysts, therefore, have called on India to renounce massive retaliation as the country's nuclear deterrent strategy. The extant scholarship on India's nuclear doctrine does problematise the credibility deficit but barely provides a policy alternative. The requirement is clearly for an alternative blueprint for a more effective nuclear deterrent strategy. Flexible response is often mentioned as a viable alternative, but literature suggests that there are varying interpretations of 'flexible response' and, consequently, of its

advantages and disadvantages. As New Delhi ponders the credibility-deficit of massive retaliation, the challenge is to establish parameters that will guide policymakers in constructing a flexible response alternative. Parameters will have to be informed by the varied interpretations of the advantages and disadvantages of flexible response, re-contextualised to meet New Delhi's strategic interests, given its technical capabilities. India may have to re-examine its retaliatory strike strategy that envisions the use of strategic nuclear weapons in response to Pakistan's first use of tactical nuclear weapons.

This paper is an attempt to chart the contours of the debate and the policy alternatives that India should weigh as it prepares to make its nuclear deterrent strategy more credible. It argues that for flexible response to serve as a lynchpin in India's nuclear doctrine, the country must begin exploring its contours. The paper, therefore, seeks to develop the concept of 'flexible response' in the Indian strategic environment. It charts out certain parameters on which an alternative doctrine of flexible response can potentially be based. Such a policy-shift must correspond with India's deterrence objectives and its nuclear wherewithal.

The paper is divided into two major sections. The first deliberates on massive retaliation, explains the concept and its origins, its application in the Indian context, and its weaknesses. The second section focuses on flexible response as an alternative, discussing its origins in the Cold War era, and its relevance in contemporary India. It examines the possibilities and the challenges of a flexible deterrent posture that India can, and should, adopt. The paper concludes that even when officially India maintains its policy of massive retaliation, New Delhi must debate extensively the advantages and weaknesses of shifting towards a flexible response strategy.

A caveat is in order: the debate being engaged with here is strictly over India's declaratory doctrine. Recent scholarship suggests that it is the nuclear posture – “the capabilities, deployment patterns, and command and control procedures a state uses to manage and operationalize its nuclear weapons capability” – that reflects what a state can do with its nuclear weapons and thus captures a state's ability to deter various kinds of conflicts.² The examination of India's nuclear posture thus becomes important in assessing whether India can employ the retaliatory strategies of massive retaliation or flexible response (and its interpretations), for instance. The current nuclear posture of India is unclear about what New Delhi *intends* to do with its nuclear weapons and how the adversary perceives the Indian state's intentions. Does it view them primarily as instruments of deterrence, or of warfighting? As William Kaufmann argues in his analysis of the requirements of deterrence, intentions of a state forms an important element of the credibility of its nuclear retaliatory strategy as a tool of deterrence.³ India's declaratory doctrine and how experts from India, Pakistan and the US read it, becomes an important indicator of the credibility of India's nuclear deterrence as it reflects the country's intentions. It is the reason that while India's capabilities and procedures to operationalise those capabilities are considered, the study focuses more on the compatibility of massive retaliation and flexible response, on one hand, and India's intentions in its declaratory doctrine and the interpretations of the doctrine.

II. MASSIVE RETALIATION AND NFU: PILLARS OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

The two pillars of India's nuclear doctrine are Massive Retaliation (MR) and No First Use (NFU). Following the 1998 nuclear tests, a Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) was unveiled by New Delhi in August 1999.

The doctrine prepared by a group of mostly civilian strategists of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) advocated a posture of “punitive retaliation (PR)” in case deterrence collapses. PR was adopted largely in response to Pakistan's attack at Kargil that resulted in a three-month-long war between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. Pakistan thought it could pursue a limited aims conventional war to seize territory under the cover of nuclear weapons, exposing the inadequacy of the doctrinal retaliation of “adequate response”. This prompted a rethinking of the form of retaliation enshrined in the Indian nuclear doctrine.⁴ Although, this change remained inexplicable, it nevertheless proffered flexibility to respond at a time and place of India's choosing. However, again, in November 1999, the Indian government shifted the extent of the retaliatory punishment with “assured retaliation” (AR) in the doctrine. In 2003, there was another change—a shift from AR to MR. Between November 1999 and 2003, multiple external factors induced this shift between “assured retaliation” of November 1999, and finally to MR in 2003. The first was the September 11, 2001 terror attacks against the United States, followed by the 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. The latter precipitated a massive military mobilisation by India in a quest to punish Pakistan for sponsoring the attack, but India failed to mete out punishment through coercive diplomacy and only secured “rhetorical assurance” from Pakistan to prevent terrorism against India.⁵

The DND then claimed, “India's policy is of credible minimum nuclear deterrence.” Credible minimum deterrence would require “sufficient, survivable and operationally prepared nuclear forces”; a “robust command and control system”; “effective intelligence and early warning capabilities,” “comprehensive planning and training for operations in line with the strategy”: and the “will to employ nuclear forces and weapons.” In order to meet the test of minimum deterrence, the

doctrine envisioned a nuclear force structure consisting of a triad of “aircraft, mobile land-based missiles and sea-based assets.” Effective deterrence also entailed a capability to convert peacetime deployment into employable forces in the shortest possible time, and to survive any significant degradation (meaning first use or strike) by the enemy and to retaliate effectively.⁶

The subsequent revision and release of the official doctrine in 2003 introduced the word “massive” in response to a nuclear attack, instead of the phrase “massive retaliation” commonly used in Cold War parlance as the basis of India's employment of nuclear weapons. Despite the ambiguity in the phrase, “retaliate massively to inflict unacceptable damage”, some experts have argued that India's massive retaliation is non-credible. The crisis in India's nuclear doctrine is due to a strong perception within an increasingly vocal section of the country's strategic establishment that MR has failed to prevent Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. If anything, Pakistan, with its nuclear arsenal, views itself as immune from Indian conventional retribution for its sponsorship of sub-conventional violence.⁸

The demand for changing the weight of retaliation enshrined in the current doctrine has come about following the terror attacks carried out by Pakistani terrorists on India's financial capital, Mumbai in November 2008, which led to a three-day siege. India's non-response to the attacks was seen by Pakistan as another instance of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal deterring Indian retribution. For those demanding a revision to the doctrine, another critical precipitating factor is the shifts in Pakistan's nuclear posture, particularly its development of TNWs. Some strategists have proposed a conventional strike against Rawalpindi's use of terrorist proxies. A rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal supports Pakistan's introduction of TNWs, which is now

plutonium-based; this constrains India's conventional response. Indeed, this is the core of the challenge confronting India's strategic elites, and it has divided the Indian strategic establishment. The balance of the debate is between two schools of thought: the nuclear minimalists or moderates, and the nuclear maximalists or expansionists.⁹

India's nuclear doctrine has come under a two-pronged attack – first is the diminishing credibility of its retaliatory threat in the form of MR and the second is India's policy of NFU. A corollary to this increasing unease with India's nuclear doctrine is the inadequate expansion of India's conventional forces along the border and Line of Control (LoC) against Pakistan. The growing gap between Indian and Pakistani conventional forces presents challenges inviting Indian analysts to consider a revision.¹⁰

There are three major schools of thought within India's strategic establishment, about shifting the country's nuclear doctrine from MR back to PR. The central themes of the debate are credibility, risk, weight of retaliatory punishment (massive or proportional), and NFU. There are three essential groups within the Indian debate. The first group, dubbed the “*sceptics*”, consist ironically of both nuclear abolitionists and nuclear maximalists, and stand in opposition to MR and NFU. The second group consists of “*minus MR status quoists*” that call for preserving NFU, but seek abandonment of MR. Finally, a third subset of nuclear minimalists, dubbed the “*status quoists*”, support retaining the existing doctrine (See table 1).

Table 1: Competing Schools on Indian Nuclear Doctrine

Sceptics (Maximalists and Abolitionists)	Abandon No First Use (NFU) and Massive Retaliation (MR), introduce Punitive Retaliation (PR), and retain ambiguity in retaliation.
Minus MR Status Quoists (Minimalists)	Retain NFU, abandon MR and introduce Punitive Retaliation (PR).
Status Quoists (Minimalists)	Retain NFU and MR.

The *sceptics* of MR and NFU claim it is deterministic and strains credibility, as it defies the logic of threatening nuclear annihilation against an adversary to deter its employment of TNWs against an “advancing [Indian] formation.”¹¹ The *sceptic* view also contests the merits of massive retaliation in response to a Pakistani tactical nuclear attack on the ground that it violates the principle of proportionality. They prefer replacing it with punitive retaliation and calibrating the weight of retaliation. Massive retaliation and minimum deterrence are incompatible,¹² simply because a limited Indian nuclear force cannot service a massive retaliatory posture.¹³ Further, the *sceptics* contend, NFU has value only during times of peace, and is “something of a hoax,” which New Delhi will quickly jettison in wartime.¹⁴ India cannot be confident of absorbing a devastating nuclear first strike and then inflict substantially devastating riposte, as the survivability of its retaliatory capability is suspect. Second, India's crisis management capacities are its Achilles heel: if India struggles to effectively manage as predictable an occurrence as adverse weather, how will it cope with a surprise first nuclear attack against its cities?¹⁵ Further, *sceptics* see NFU inviting a first strike from the opponent thereby decapitating India's Command, Control and Communication (C3) system and paralysing decision-making.¹⁶ While a vocal minority oppose NFU, it remains a central feature of India's nuclear doctrine. However, the canisterising of existing Indian land-based missile capabilities such as the Agni, at least, notionally makes possible an Indian first strike against Pakistan.¹⁷ The latter view is strongly contested because India simply does not possess the numerical strength in warheads to successfully execute a first strike against Pakistan, let alone maintain any residual capability against China.¹⁸ Therefore, a successful Indian first strike is a remote possibility and more in the domain of speculation.

The second group, “*minus MR status quoist*”, calls for a partial revision of the Indian nuclear doctrine. They contend that “punitive” retaliation replace “massive”, because the latter “limits India's retaliatory options”; however, dropping India's NFU policy would be unwise.¹⁹ A change in NFU could lead to pre-emption by India and Pakistan.²⁰ This group contends MR was not credible even during the Cold War²¹ and that India substitute “massive” with “punitive” as it was in the 1999 DND.²² An “escalatory nuclear war” is a better way to prevent Pakistan from viewing its TNW-capability as a neutraliser against Indian conventional advantages or strength.²³ MR makes the Pakistanis believe that a nuclear war can be fought and controlled.²⁴ While a vocal minority of sceptics oppose NFU, it remains a central feature of India's nuclear doctrine.

NFU signalled to the adversary that India could both withstand a nuclear first strike and “retaliate punitively.” Secondly, it was an “optimal compromise between India's commitment to nuclear disarmament and its nuclear security imperatives.”²⁵ “Punitive retaliation”, as opposed to “massive”, implies a quest to return to a more flexible and proportionate form of retaliation, which was enshrined in the DND. This is important, as some external observers have pointed out that India's move away from massive retaliation to one driven by “ambiguity and flexibility” and revert to a “punitive retaliation” threat enshrined in the 1999 DND.²⁶ *Sceptics* seek reversion to India's ambiguous posture on nuclear use, which was “lost in 1999” when the DND was made public by the Vajpayee-led government.²⁷ To be sure, the abolitionist wing among the *sceptics* sees ambiguity as bequeathing an opportunity to de-operationalise Indian nuclear forces, representing a step toward disarmament, whereas the maximalist wing sees the benefits of ambiguity in providing room for shifting doctrine and

posture for new warfighting missions and a commensurately larger and diversified nuclear force.²⁸

For their part, the third group, the *status quoists*, have cautioned against any change, calling for the retention of India's existing posture of retaliating massively against any type of nuclear attack. In 2013, the imperative for sustaining the threat of massive retaliation was articulated by the Chairman of the NSAB, Shyam Saran under the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Saran noted, “[If India] is attacked with such weapons, it would engage in nuclear retaliation which will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage on the adversary...A limited nuclear war is a contradiction in terms. Any nuclear exchange, once initiated, would swiftly and inexorably escalate to the strategic level...Pakistan would be prudent not to assume otherwise as it sometimes appears to do.”²⁹ Other *status quoists* share this view, rejecting the argument that a nuclear exchange can actually be controlled.³⁰ These experts contend that massive retaliation serves the purpose of creating uncertainty in the minds of the adversary and completely reject assigning a warfighting role to nuclear weapons.³¹ Indeed, it represents a generic and substantive critique against flexible response.³² Therefore, India's focus ought to be on improving its delivery capabilities and ensuring their survival. Ultimately, the onus of initiating an attack and the consequent escalation is on Pakistan.³³ “Assured retaliation” is an imperative, because India's nuclear arsenal has only retributive value, as nuclear weapons play a highly limited role in Indian military strategy. Consequently, its doctrine reflects a strategic view of nuclear weapons, undergirded by minimalism, credibility, and survivability,³⁴ which contrasts sharply with Pakistan's nuclear posture visibly demonstrated by its development of TNWs and Rawalpindi's quest to conflate nuclear weapons with sub-conventional conflict.³⁵

Yet other *status quoists* also draw attention to the importance of risk. The “risk” of nuclear use is sufficient to deter and not the certitude of second-strike retaliation to ensure deterrence,³⁶ which parts ways from the position of “assured retaliation” advocates. Although, a minority holds the view that it only takes a low number of nuclear weapons to meet India's deterrence requirements; it represents the most minimalistic conception of nuclear deterrence, which India's growing capabilities do not reflect. Officially and as of this writing, the Modi Government since assuming office in 2014 has refused to bring about a shift in India's nuclear doctrine, despite the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) statements both in their campaign rallies in 2014 and in the party manifesto, that it will review India's posture once it comes to power.³⁷ Yet covert shifts may have occurred in India's employment strategy and posture as Shivshankar Menon suggested in his memoir:

“For the same reason, calibrated or proportional responses and deterrence were not the preferred posture in the initial stages of the weapons program, for it might tempt adversaries to test the space available below the threshold for full nuclear retaliation, as indeed occurred in the Kargil conflict in 1999. Instead, the logical posture at first was counter-value targeting, or targeting the opponent's assets, rather than counter-force targeting, which concentrates on the enemy's military and command structures.”³⁸

Nevertheless, it is clear from the foregoing overview that the *status quoists*—notwithstanding pressures from the *sceptics and MR minus status quoists*—will continue to have the upper hand on New Delhi's nuclear doctrine for now. This posture will remain doctrinally consistent about retaliating massively to an adversary's first use of a weapon of mass destruction (WMD), coupled with NFU. Despite India's public commitment to MR and NFU, New Delhi may be privately

pursuing a counterforce strategy as suggested by Vipin Narang and Shiv Shankar Menon. Yet, why is India still wedded to MR? What are the strengths and weaknesses of an MR doctrine?

Strengths of Massive Retaliation

The strength of massive retaliation lies in the fact that it provides a basis for limiting an expansion of the nuclear arsenal. MR bequeaths several benefits: it is simple to follow in thought and practice, prevents disruptions in civil-military relations, and importantly, obviates the imposition of financial burdens on the Indian state. For instance, a shift away from a massive retribution-only posture places considerable strain on resources, possibly with the unavoidable introduction of TNWs and nuclear deployments on a high state of operational readiness. However, under some models of flexible response, India could possibly avoid a hair-trigger nuclear posture, pursue a retribution-only or proportionate nuclear retaliation without compromising the existing centralised nuclear Command and Control (C&C) structure, but on the condition that India develops a larger nuclear arsenal.

While current Indian nuclear capabilities increasingly mimic the five designated nuclear weapons states,³⁹ the second strength of massive retaliation, coupled with the NFU policy, is that it helps limit disruptions to India's delicate civil-military architecture. With a centralised command structure, India, as a developing democracy has historically had an entrenched system of civilian control over the armed forces.⁴⁰ While the Indian armed services have enjoyed considerable autonomy in shaping service doctrine and in prosecuting military operations, the arrival of nuclear weapons has presented a challenge to India's civilian decision-makers. The military's role is absent in shaping

India's nuclear doctrine, demonstrating a resistance to extending delegative authority and control of the Indian nuclear arsenal to the military, that is the end user. Therefore, the current nuclear doctrine preserves the institutional balance and control of India's nuclear arsenal in favour of the civilians. To that extent, India's declared doctrine represents not just a compromise between a warfighting and a deterrence or a recessed nuclear deterrence, but preserves the custodianship of the Indian arsenal in the hands of civilians particularly in peacetime and will become "devolutionary" to the Indian military in the event of war or "strategic decapitation".⁴¹ As shown in the foregoing, the current doctrine strives to avoid creating a hair-trigger posture that is fully deployed, notwithstanding canisterising, with warheads mated to delivery vehicles, minimising the risk of accidental or unauthorised use. This contrasts with the highly alerted postures of the superpowers during the Cold War, which is not manifest in India's doctrinal conception of massive retaliation. As we have seen, massive retaliation under the New Look Policy of the Eisenhower administration sought an instantaneous response to any local aggression. India's retaliatory threat, on the other hand, rests on the certitude of retaliation rather than its rapidity. However, it must be noted that the development of an Indian SSBN fleet could just as well generate command and control problems as it potentially does with canisterisation.

Critically, India's minimum requirements of credibility have been fairly well satisfied under the official nuclear doctrine enunciated in 2003. It clearly and specifically stipulates that New Delhi will employ nuclear force massively in response to a first WMD strike and not conventional or sub-conventional strikes by the adversary. As enunciated in the official doctrine, it caters only to a singular contingency where there is initial use of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons (NBCW) against Indian forces and Indian territory. Further, for India's civilian

decision-makers, an NFU combined with a second strike posture remains highly beneficial and attractive, because it conveys restraint and helps India overcome technology denial regimes, promotes nuclear commerce and membership to various export control regimes.⁴²

On the other hand, the original and crudest conception of massive retaliation prominently found in the early years of the Cold War under the Eisenhower is not quite what is envisioned in India's doctrine. Further, the US never pursued an NFU mated to a massive retaliation-only policy. However, both the doctrine and a segment of India's strategic elites continue to advocate MR share the same scepticism about nuclear warfighting that MR advocates during the 1950s Eisenhower administration did.⁴³ Nevertheless, India's current doctrine suffers from weaknesses.

Weaknesses of Massive Retaliation

Critics point out that India's declaratory nuclear doctrine of retaliating massively is at odds with its presumed conventional military doctrine, known as "Cold Start." The latter calls for fighting a "limited conventional war under nuclear conditions;"⁴⁴ the former calls for retaliating massively against any use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) against Indian population centres, territory and military forces. For instance, the Cold Start doctrine envisages launching conventional strikes in retaliation for Pakistani-sponsored terrorist attacks against Indian security personnel and civilians through limited incursions by the Indian Army into Pakistan and seizing small chunks of Pakistani territory.⁴⁵ The difficulty is evident, particularly in wartime, in pairing Cold Start with a nuclear doctrine and employment of massive retaliation; the latter stands in deep contradiction with the former. If Cold Start and MR are to be compatible and have any efficacy,

they must be viewed in a continuum of rungs on the escalation ladder. The gap that needs bridging is between Pakistan's TNW posture with a revision in India's nuclear doctrine and posture.⁴⁶

This contrasts with New Delhi's use of conventional force under nuclear conditions, as opposed to Pakistan's resort to sub-conventional violence under the nuclear umbrella. The second problem stems from the incompatibility in its nuclear declaratory doctrine and its nuclear employment strategy.⁴⁷ The gap between India's declaratory doctrine and the operational role for its nuclear weapons is considered by some critics to be non-credible, because it could trigger miscalculation and sow more doubts. However, even if India pursued a doctrine of massive retaliation, its actual employment strategy may be more flexible and proportionate.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as Gaurav Kampani notes, while India's evolving conventional warfighting doctrine, through “...Cold Start envisages a war of limited aims with limited means”, its declaratory nuclear doctrine of “massive retaliation proposes an unlimited war with unlimited means.”⁴⁹

The third and final challenge lies in the fragile coordination between India's conventional and nuclear forces.⁵⁰ Prior to 1999, Indian strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan was based on dissuasion and denial. Post 1999, the strategy started to shift to a denial and punishment-based strategy following the release of the DND. Cold Start principally had its origins in another event—the 13 December 2001 Pakistan-sponsored terror attack on the Indian Parliament, which led to massive Indian military mobilisation along the India-Pakistan border, but failed to result in Indian action to punish Pakistan.⁵¹ Therefore, between the release of the DND in 1999 and the official nuclear doctrine of 2003, the India-Pakistan standoff of 2001-02 stirred a debate on creating a Cold Start. The doctrine would allow Indian conventional forces to be reconfigured

to undertake rapid mobilisation and punish Pakistan for its provocations through terrorism. Pakistan, for its part, has assumed an “asymmetric escalation” posture—Rawalpindi has lowered the threshold for nuclear use in the initial and early stages to an Indian conventional riposte.⁵² However, there is no evidence yet of the existence of an official Indian Cold Start doctrine, even as there is considerable debate around it among India's strategic elites. It is worth noting that the current Army Chief, Gen. Bipin Rawat, made an observation in early 2017 that while the Cold Start doctrine exists for conventional operations, the debate is over the extent to which India's civilian elites authorise its implementation and execution.⁵³

Nevertheless, the Indian Army contemplates fighting a conventional war under nuclearised conditions. Yet civilian control of nuclear weapons in India, unlike Pakistan where the army is the apex institution, the prime custodian and end-user of the country's nuclear capabilities, militates against the pursuit of a warfighting posture or a posture that mimicked the Flexible Response posture of NATO during the Cold War. India runs the risk of poor coordination between its conventional and nuclear forces in wartime. Further, at the declaratory level of the doctrine as opposed to its actual employment, India risks being condemned to two extremes: avoid reacting at all, or escalate massively to impose substantial or prohibitive costs in response to a Pakistani terrorist attack.⁵⁴ Some critics deem both approaches unsatisfactory. They cite reasons of proportionality: if Pakistan employed TNWs on the battlefield against Indian forces and avoided Indian population centres, while India responded by targeting Pakistani cities, this response would count as disproportionate.⁵⁵ Conversely, Pakistan has little incentive to limit its use of atomic force, if India retains MR.

Thus, the centralised civilian nuclear command and control structure of the Indian nuclear posture—as opposed to conventional operations where the armed services oversee the execution of operations—creates substantive coordination problems. However, there is a caveat; the devolution of control of nuclear weapons to the navy, in particular, could change with the emergence of the sea-leg of India's nuclear deterrent.⁵⁶

The Cold War strategist William Kaufman, in an incisive analysis of massive retaliation, demonstrated the incredibility of a massive retaliation as conceived by the Eisenhower administration. In order to avoid the stark choice between capitulation and an all-nuclear war undergirding massive retaliation, the US, he argued, has had to pursue a more flexible posture that required a mix of conventional, tactical and strategic nuclear capabilities to deter more credibly.⁵⁷ Should India revise its nuclear doctrine and adopt a flexible response as a nuclear posture that combines strategic capabilities with tactical capabilities?

III. FLEXIBLE RESPONSE' AS ALTERNATIVE TO MR

The definition of 'flexible response' as a nuclear and military strategy has remained “flexible” since its conception.⁵⁸ The strategy was conceived during the Kennedy administration in the United States in the 1960s as an attempt to shift away from the “massive retaliation” problem of having to choose between “holocaust and humiliation” as adopted by the preceding Eisenhower administration. It evolved dramatically by the time it was adopted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1967. It not only fell short of what Kennedy and then US Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, had originally wanted it to be, but NATO allies – United Kingdom, France and West

Germany – understood the concept differently and there was no common understanding on how it was to be implemented.

In the Indian setting, flexible response has emerged over the years as a suggested alternative to India's massive retaliation strategy. Though the declared Indian nuclear doctrine posits that India would “retaliate massively to inflict unacceptable damage,” which is an ambiguous phrase, analysts have come to the conclusion that New Delhi's retaliatory strategy is similar to the “massive retaliation” as articulated by the US Secretary of State, John F. Dulles in 1954 during the Eisenhower administration. It referred to the threat of countervalue retaliation with use of strategic nuclear weapons, but with a different threshold.⁵⁹

While reviewing literature on India's massive retaliation strategy, apart from passing references, there is a lack of elaboration on what comprises the alternative strategy of flexible response and what its implications could be. This section fills the gap by assessing two major possible interpretations of flexible response – proportionate retaliation and retaliatory nuclear strike. These two broad categories of the interpretation of an Indian flexible response are based on the critiques of India's massive retaliation. Establishing the two interpretations of flexible response, this section discusses the challenges to their implementations and their implications on India and its security.

Replacing Massive Retaliation

While assessing the US' flexible response or controlled response (used as a synonym), Thomas Schelling explains that “[a]s a generic concept, 'flexible response' can be most easily described as everything that

'massive retaliation' was not."⁶⁰ Thus, in the Indian context as well, understanding of what flexible response should include must begin with the understanding of what in India's massive retaliation is problematic. While the previous section elaborates India's massive retaliation, including its strengths and weaknesses, a focused revisit to some of the shortcomings is needed in order to arrive at the parameters that must be considered for the conceptualisation of India's flexible response strategy.

Experts from both within and outside India have analysed India's massive countervalue retaliation based on the understanding laid out above. To begin with, it has been argued that it is inhuman to use the threat to retaliate massively and use strategic nuclear weapons to destroy population and industrial centres in response to, say, use of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan on a battlefield on its own territory.⁶¹

Secondly, a massive countervalue retaliation by India would invite a similar response from Pakistan as the latter's strategic nuclear assets would remain intact. No ballistic missile defence systems, should India succeed in developing one, could completely safeguard Indian cities from Pakistani strategic nuclear weapons. This was in fact a major critique of Dulles' articulation of massive retaliation in 1954 in the US as well. As Samuel F. Wells, Jr. notes, "strategic analysts outside the government argued that it was absurd to expect the United States to defend Western Europe by striking the Soviet Union with atomic weapons, since this would invite similar retaliation upon its own cities."⁶² The difference in the two contexts must be highlighted here. It was arguably more "absurd" for the US to have had committed to massively retaliate against all forms of Soviet aggression, including non-nuclear, on not just its own territories but that of its allies in Western Europe. Nonetheless, even as India commits to massive

countervalue retaliation against nuclear first use on its own troops by Pakistan, it leaves Indian cities vulnerable to Pakistani strategic nuclear weapons. Further, the political cost would be too high for New Delhi to execute its threat once nuclear deterrence collapses. Pakistan possesses nuclear-tipped cruise missiles such as the Ra'ad and Babur, which are capable of overcoming whatever Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system India deploys.⁶³

Consequently, should deterrence collapse, the burden of escalation of nuclear conflict from tactical to strategic levels falls on India. Traditional Indian understanding deems the use of any kind of nuclear weapons for war as unacceptable, allowing defenders of massive countervalue retaliation to argue that Pakistan will be responsible for an all-out nuclear war should it use tactical nuclear weapons first. However, there seems to be an assumption in New Delhi that it is a universal sentiment to view the first use of nuclear weapons of any scale as being unacceptable. On the contrary, Pakistan's shift from credible minimum deterrence to full spectrum deterrence with the threat of using nuclear weapons first to deter and defend against conventional aggression by India, appears to be informed by the US and NATO's experience from the Cold War against Soviet Union. For decades, there was a perception among most NATO allies that NATO will unlikely be able to defend its territories against a Soviet non-nuclear aggression with its non-nuclear capabilities. Therefore, not only did the US deploy a large number of tactical nuclear weapons with its own troops stationed across Western Europe, but also placed many of them in direct control of its allies.⁶⁴

Considering these shortcomings, many Indian and international experts have argued that India's massive countervalue retaliation is not credible as a deterrent to, say, the first use of tactical nuclear weapons by

Pakistan. These analysts suggest a shift away to flexible response, albeit with differing interpretations of what comprises such strategy.

Conceptualising Flexible Response(s)

Similar to the case of the US and the NATO during the Cold War, there is no consensus on what should constitute 'flexible response' for India as alternative to massive countervalue retaliation. Rajesh Rajagopalan, for instance, captures this lack of conceptualisation of an Indian flexible response by noting that “one solution [to address the credibility deficit of India's massive retaliation] that *does not appear* to have been seriously considered in this debate yet is the possibility of considering some Indian version of the flexible response doctrine.”⁶⁵

Critics of MR, however, have put forth a number of suggestions. Perhaps the first Indian strategist to present multiple interpretations of a flexible nuclear retaliatory strategy was Lt. Gen. (ret'd) K Sundarji. In his seminal paper in *Trishul*, Gen. Sundarji suggests that the “philosophy may therefore be one of minimum response, even if it stayed below the received level. It could be quid pro quo response equated to the received strike. It could be a quid pro quo plus response, to incorporate the element of threat... Finally, it could be a spasmodic reaction that aims at the drastic reduction in the adversary's retaliatory capability...”⁶⁶ This section draws mainly from Gen. Sundarji's articulation to construct two major interpretations of flexible response in the Indian context: proportionate retaliation and retaliatory nuclear strike.

Proportionate Retaliation

Apart from Gen. Sundarji's initial articulation in the 1990s, a number of scholars and analysts in the recent years have argued that India's

strategy of massive countervalue retaliation would be too big to be credible as a deterrent. For instance, experts like Rajesh Rajagopalan, Brahma Chellaney, Manoj Joshi and even those from the US like Evan Montgomery and former US Undersecretary of Defense, Eric Edelman, among others have called for the retaliation strategy to be made proportionate – in other words, a tit-for-tat against use of a tactical nuclear weapon by Pakistan.

For instance, while critiquing India's massive retaliation, Rajesh Rajagopalan suggests that the “Indian nuclear doctrine could be modified from 'massive retaliation' to 'modulated retaliation' to leave options for the level of response that India could consider in response to any nuclear attack, giving it the flexibility to consider a proportional or proportional-plus retaliation.”⁶⁷ Use of “proportional-plus” by Rajagopalan may hint towards a graduated response strategy, which involves development of multiple nuclear retaliatory options along the ladder of escalation of a nuclear conflict from tactical to strategic levels. However, given that a graduated response would involve options for proportionate retaliation, the two understandings have been merged under one category herein though it is the latter which forms the subset of the former.

While recommending proportionate retaliation, experts like Brahma Chellaney and Manoj Joshi call on India to develop and deploy its own arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. David O. Smith explains this logic:

[They argue for] tactical nuclear weapons on the grounds that, without them, should deterrence fail, India's culture of restraint would inhibit the countervalue response presumed in the Indian Nuclear Doctrine. In their view, India requires other nuclear options along the ladder of escalation that allow the opportunity

for a deal to be struck with Pakistan before any future conflict escalates to a general nuclear exchange.⁶⁸

This assessment, based on their critique of India's massive countervalue retaliation, also presents a call for development of options for proportionate response with more choices along the escalatory ladder of nuclear conflict. Evan Montgomery and Eric Edelman, meanwhile, contend that acquisition of "limited nuclear capabilities" similar to that of Pakistan

could potentially deter nuclear use in the event of a limited conventional conflict. That is, by holding out the threat of a symmetrical and proportional response, [India] would avoid the 'all or nothing' nuclear retaliation dilemma it now seems to face... Confronting an opponent with its own battlefield nuclear weapons, Islamabad could not reasonably conclude that limited nuclear strikes against invading ground forces would stop an invasion without triggering a nuclear reprisal.⁶⁹

The argument presented by Montgomery and Edelman is that of escalation dominance, which has also been discussed at length by Toby Dalton and George Perkovich, in their assessment of how the shift in India's nuclear strategy from assured retaliation to asymmetrical escalation could allow India to have a dominant deterrence over Pakistan, current circumstances being the opposite.⁷⁰ Pakistan's awareness that its use of tactical nuclear weapons would be reciprocated by India proportionately would make the risk of escalation of a prospective nuclear conflict fall on the former; it will thus act as a deterrent against Pakistan.

This interpretation of flexible response based on the strategy of proportionate (-plus) retaliation would require substantial revision in

India's nuclear force structure if India introduces tactical nuclear weapons as requisite. Interestingly however, Rajagopalan, while discussing his understanding of proportionate retaliation, argues that such a strategy “requires no change in Indian nuclear force structure or command-and-control arrangements, which are the biggest problems with [tactical nuclear weapons].”⁷¹ To bypass the challenges of deploying tactical nuclear weapons on the ground, Rajagopalan suggests “deploying much smaller-sized warheads, but delivered by bombers rather than missiles, to retaliate against any Pakistani use of TNWs,” adding that “such a capability will allow India to have a TNW-capability but without having to deploy the associated short-range weapons that make TNWs generally unpalatable.”⁷²

Indeed, India's posture of assured retaliation does not inhibit New Delhi from launching a nuclear retaliation proportionate to the first use of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan. While India may not be able to retaliate proportionately to Pakistan's first use in the same battlefield and instantaneously, India can assure proportionate retaliation at any counterforce target located, anywhere in Pakistan by using its sub-KT fission warheads mated with medium range ballistic missiles or delivered through air-bombers. India can thus retaliate proportionately without having to deploy tactical nuclear weapons with pre-delegation of the launch authority. While that may help India avoid the ancillary risks like accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons, whether the threat of proportionate retaliation will be a credible deterrent to Pakistan's first use of tactical nuclear weapons needs examination. Part of the Pakistani premise behind the development of tactical delivery systems like the Nasr is that India's MR doctrine is non-credible, and this will become evident when India fails to launch a massive response to one or two highly localised Nasr detonations.⁷³

Retaliatory Nuclear Strike

The second interpretation of India's flexible response as conceptualised herewith is the strategy of retaliatory nuclear strike: the use of strategic nuclear weapons to eliminate Pakistan's nuclear assets in retaliation after absorbing the first use of tactical nuclear weapon.

What leads to the conceptualisation of retaliatory nuclear strike? A significant shortcoming of India's current nuclear retaliatory strategy is its association with the countervalue targeting policy, as explained in the previous section. The threat to destroy the population centres of Pakistan in response to its first use of a tactical nuclear weapon in a battlefield is an incredible deterrent since the burden of escalation falling on New Delhi is too high. Such retaliation, which leaves Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons intact, also makes Indian cities vulnerable to massive countervalue retaliation by Pakistan. Thus, to address these shortcomings, proposals have been made to make the targeting policy flexible and include counterforce targets, which have military utility to the adversary like nuclear assets, while retaining the scale of retaliation as massive with the use of strategic nuclear weapons.⁷⁴

Shivshankar Menon has also recently suggested the inclusion of counterforce targeting in the basket of India's retaliatory options to Pakistan's first use of a tactical nuclear weapon.⁷⁵ As Menon notes, “[t]here is nothing in the present doctrine that prevents India from responding proportionately to a nuclear attack, from choosing a mix of military and civilian targets for its nuclear weapons.”⁷⁶

However, the argument to include counterforce targeting in India's retaliatory strategy leads to a larger question on the utility of making

India's targeting policy flexible. As with massive countervalue retaliation, even a counterforce retaliation would leave India vulnerable to Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons, unless India conducts a comprehensive nuclear strike as part of its counterforce retaliation to eliminate Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Menon also suggests that “circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against a [nuclear weapon state] that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent,” reflecting his call for the consideration of an Indian nuclear strike.⁷⁷ Menon's use of the word “imminent” in describing the threshold for India to conduct a nuclear strike, along with reference to a “potential grey area” on India's commitment to the NFU policy, in one of the paragraphs of his book is confusing. Elsewhere, he explains the wisdom of no-first-use and avoids reference to an Indian first strike when the threat of Pakistan using nuclear weapons first is “imminent.”

This confusion allows Menon's argument for an Indian nuclear strike to be read in two ways – a pre-emptive first strike conducted before, say, Pakistan uses its tactical nuclear weapon, thus questioning India's commitment to NFU; or a retaliatory nuclear strike that eliminates Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons after India absorbs the first use of a tactical nuclear weapon by Pakistan, which does not challenge India's NFU policy. Vipin Narang, for instance, in his presentation at the 2017 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, contends that it is the former – pre-emptive first strike, which Menon suggests in his book.⁷⁸

This part of the study uses Menon's argument for an Indian nuclear strike to form the second interpretation of the flexible response

strategy. Since the objective is to incorporate counterforce targeting in the strategy and, more importantly, address the shortcoming of massive countervalue retaliation of leaving Indian cities vulnerable to Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons, both readings of Menon's argument could qualify as this interpretation. However, pre-emptive first strike is a strategy whose implementation would have greater implications as well as challenges and a comprehensive study of the same is beyond the scope of this paper. The second interpretation of flexible response, as discussed in this paper, is therefore the strategy of "retaliatory nuclear strike" under which India threatens to conduct a nuclear strike to eliminate Pakistan's nuclear weapons after absorbing the first use of a tactical nuclear weapon by Pakistan.

Implementing the strategy of retaliatory nuclear strike would require substantial qualitative expansion of the force structure as well, including development of delivery systems of higher accuracy, use of Multiple Independently-targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs) as warheads, and real-time intelligence on locations and movements of strategic nuclear weapons of the adversary, among others. Since this too remains retaliatory, it does not require any change in the command and control structure that currently exists in India.

Challenges

Both interpretations of Indian flexible response would pose challenges. Given that the two interpretations are quite distinct, the challenges posed by them are discussed separately. However, a commonality between the two interpretations is that they would require a drastic change in New Delhi's approach to the utility of nuclear weapons – looking at nuclear weapons as tools of warfighting and not just political tools of deterrence, though to different degrees. Furthermore, the

credibility of deterrence can be reinforced with a shift in India's nuclear posture, inducing a change the adversary's perceptions.

Should the circumstances be much different from the contingencies which may arise under the strategy of massive countervalue retaliation, will India have to execute the strategy if and when nuclear deterrence collapses? A purely countervalue retaliation strategy can be executed without necessarily inflicting any damage to the adversary's military assets; it would invite similar massive countervalue retaliation by Pakistan. India's massive countervalue retaliation in itself cannot be labelled as “war terminating” but rather one that escalates war to the higher levels on the escalation ladder.

From Proportionate Retaliation

Apart from a radical shift required in the understanding of the utility of nuclear weapons, proportionate retaliation, even without tactical nuclear weapons, will require an increase in the size of India's nuclear arsenal. Numerically, the India arsenal which stand at India may not find it in its interest to expand its arsenal substantially at a time when it is seeking to integrate itself into the global non-proliferation architecture and is attempting to consolidate its status as a responsible nuclear weapon state, outside the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

The most important of the challenges from a proportionate retaliation strategy is if such a strategy would be a credible deterrent. As proponents for India dominating the escalation ladder, such as Montgomery and Edelman argue, with the political cost of following up on the threat of proportionate retaliation being low, India is more likely to execute this threat if Pakistan uses its tactical nuclear weapon first.

Therefore, “Islamabad could not reasonably conclude that limited nuclear strikes against invading ground forces would stop an invasion without triggering a nuclear reprisal.” At the same time, it can also be argued that Pakistan may agree to bear the cost of a proportionate nuclear reprisal by India to its first use of a tactical nuclear weapon if that halts the Indian military invasion.

As proponents for a middle path between massive and proportionate retaliation argue, while the scale of the threat should not be too high for the adversary to doubt that one would follow up, it should not be too low, either, that the adversary is willing to bear such costs for other prospective gains. Thus, proportionate retaliation may not necessarily address the credibility deficit of massive countervalue retaliation – it would only alter the nature of such credibility deficit, requiring India to contemplate possibilities of dominating escalation.

From Retaliatory Nuclear Strike

A question that New Delhi will need to address, should it consider counterforce, is if there is a need to extend such counterforce to the level of a retaliatory nuclear strike that threatens elimination of Pakistan's nuclear retaliatory capability. New Delhi could consider a flexible response strategy that simply suggests inclusion of counterforce targeting. As argued earlier, however, any threat short of a nuclear strike would leave India as vulnerable to Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons as it is under the current massive countervalue retaliation strategy. From this argument emerges the interpretation of retaliatory nuclear strike – a strategy which threatens elimination of Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons if it uses a tactical nuclear weapon first.

Does India have the capability at present to execute such a threat, and if it does not, can it acquire those capabilities in the future? Experts in India have expressed their doubts.⁷⁹ Moreover, with the successful test-launch of Babur-3, the nuclear-capable submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM), in January 2017, Pakistan is now close to the completion of its nuclear triad and that reinforces the survivability of Pakistan's second-strike capability.⁸⁰ This forms another challenge that would confront policy-makers in New Delhi, should they adopt the strategy of retaliatory nuclear strike.

That being noted, if rapid escalation of a nuclear conflict from tactical to strategic level is imminent after Pakistan uses a tactical nuclear weapon first – an assumption which Shyam Saran argues exists under India's current strategy of massive countervalue retaliation as well – would India not be better off with less number of Pakistani nuclear weapons left?⁸¹ In other words, considering that India's massive countervalue retaliation would leave Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons intact, would a retaliatory nuclear strike that eliminates most, if not all, of Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons not be better for India? And would such an understanding of New Delhi's calculus following the collapse of nuclear deterrence not enhance the credibility of India's deterrent strategy in peacetime? This is important to consider in comparing the credibility of massive countervalue retaliation with that of retaliatory nuclear strike for India against the Pakistan's threat of using tactical nuclear weapon first. With the assumption that conflict will escalate from tactical to strategic level “swiftly and inexorably,” a retaliatory nuclear strike strategy places India at a better position than the massive countervalue retaliation strategy.

IV CONCLUSION


The complications of nuclear deterrence, as Patrick Morgan argues, lies in how “best to threaten” the adversary and if it fails, “to punish.”⁸² If deterrence is the manipulation of the adversary through the threat of harm, both the threat and the ensuing harm must be synthesised. The credibility of the threat hinges upon the defender's ability and more importantly, its will, to carry out the punishment. This study attempts to address this singular problem in India's nuclear deterrent: the credibility deficit in its doctrine of massive nuclear retaliation as a response to a low-level nuclear use by Pakistan. It first discussed in detail the origins of India's nuclear deterrent strategy after the 1998 nuclear tests and how it flirted with various retaliatory concepts before settling down on massive retaliation. It then pondered the pros and cons of India's massive retaliatory strategy. A vigorous domestic debate now envelops India's nuclear doctrine and strategies. The strategic community can be divided into three subgroups: The “sceptics” want to do away with both the MR and NFU; the “minus MR status quoists” want to retain the NFU but jettison MR and lastly, the “status quoists” want India to continue on the same doctrinal principles. Notwithstanding such divisions, the helplessness with which India has tolerated Pakistan's sub-conventional adventures over the last two decades has created adequate reason for the Indian strategic community to question the reasoning and efficiency of massive retaliation.

This paper, therefore, delved into creating a roadmap for an alternative retaliatory strategy for India which, rather than premised on the incredibility of massive retaliation, must be able to synthesise in adversary's risk matrix the credibility of India's deterrent threat and the consequent harm if the threat fails to deter. India therefore must start

debating a strategic response away from the extremes of massive retaliation. Conceptualising flexible response for Indian conditions, this paper argues for two kinds of retaliatory postures. First, India can signal Pakistan that it will dominate the escalation matrix through a proportionate or proportionate-plus response, underscoring the futility of employing nuclear weapons in the battlefield. At the same time, it can opt for a nuclear retaliatory strike aiming at counterforce options against Pakistani nuclear assets and thereby threatening its nuclear decimation in the event of low-level nuclear use by Islamabad. A retaliatory strike through counterforce might be the most conceivable between the two postures. However, as this paper argues, both these strategies would require substantial revision in not only India's nuclear doctrine but would also demand major investments in terms of arsenal size, sophisticated delivery systems and, most importantly, robust C4ISR capabilities. Though the need to shift gears in doctrinal thinking is apparent, the challenges to execute it are no less daunting.

Insofar as India officially remains wedded to the doctrine of massive retaliation, this article is a theoretical attempt to understand the validity and applicability of flexible response in the Indian strategic environment, which is fast changing due to changes brought in by its principal nuclear adversary – Pakistan. Yet, as the nuclear threat in its neighbourhood evolves, India's decision-makers must start cogitating over alternative policy choices. Flexible response, even with its problems, may provide a way out. Ultimately, deterrence by India in the subcontinental context is aimed not only toward nuclear use by Pakistan at various thresholds; it is part of a complex quest to use conventional and nuclear assets and strategies to deter State-Sponsored Terrorism (SST) from Pakistan. When seen together, there is asymmetry between massive retaliation, and low-intensity conflict

(which is an oxymoron when it comes to terrorism in Kashmir and other parts of India).

The question for Indian strategic decision-makers is how to use (and threaten to use) India's nuclear capability in a more credible manner to allow New Delhi options and the space to retaliate against (and deter) Pakistan's SST strategy. Escalation dominance is an important aspect of this debate.  ORF

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