



# Limited Wars in South Asia: Against the Nuclear Backdrop



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Another civilian perspective on the issue of Limited wars in South Asia. Though the writer rules out a limited Nuclear war as an obvious absurdity, his view on a conventional conflict against a backdrop of nuclear symmetry is more nuanced.

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South Asia is the region that has been witnessing state-sponsored terrorism for decades. The prevalence of enduring and recurring terrorist violence orchestrated by Pakistan has been forcing the international community to chalk out a strategy to counter terrorism. However, the western campaign for counter-terrorism made the biggest terrorist state - Pakistan - a partner. As a result, counter-terror activities could not act on the source of terrorism not only in Pakistan but also all over the world. Admittedly, in the past months, the leader of the counter-terror campaign appeared sending some signals, if not action, to Pakistan. This signal has yet not generated enough confidence and hope among people suffering from terror for decades.

Quite frequently, victims of terror are asked to make peace with terrorists in South Asia. In the region, the victim of terror, India, is advised to enter into dialogue with Pakistan. The understanding is that it will broker peace and end terrorism. The experience explains otherwise. After the Mumbai attacks, the prevailing tense atmosphere in South Asia drew attention of the international community. This focused attention and monitoring of the situation forced Pakistan to suspend its terror activities temporarily. The moment the dialogue was resumed, a series of celebratory terrorist attacks were carried out by Pakistan-based terror groups.

Many western pundits had predicted nuclear flashpoint in the tense situation. Instead the tense situation in South Asia and tough position of India produced a period of relative peace in South Asia. The traditional western position stands defeated. Similarly, Traditional Western Pundits on South Asia instantly rule out a limited war in a nuclear condition now. They predict catastrophe. An all out war. Quite interestingly, some of them had planned war in a nuclearised atmosphere during the cold war. The plan had to fight not only limited war in the nuclear shadow but also nuclear war.

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by Western nuclear theologians and their Indian counterparts has been shielding Pakistani terrorists. For years, this kind of thinking allowed Pakistan to keep its anti-India terror operation intact. The Pakistani blackmail took hundreds of innocent lives. However, time and again, the strategic community is put under pressure to explore war as an option to end terror strikes of Pakistan. 26/11 provided yet another occasion to ponder over the issue. Is a limited war under the nuclear shadow impossible? The answer is no. The entire formulation of the impossibility of limited war in the nuclear atmosphere is based on limited and lopsided facts. The nuclear world has a very short history and often complex history.

The first problem of all these theoretical formulations is the conceptualisation of limited war. Some writings of the early cold war period generally referred the World Wars as the real wars and all the wars fought at the relatively lower scale as limited wars. Some of the writings considered the conquest of a country as the total war, but the withdrawal from the enemy's territory as limited war.

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However, the dominant understanding on the limited war, during the early decades of the cold war, was in terms of use of tactical and other battlefield weapons for limited effect. In fact, the attempt to marry nuclear weapons with limited war was made by the US government as early as 1948. It started Project Vista at the California Institute of Technology to explore the role of tactical nuclear weapons for limited warfare. The effort continued in the later years.

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Throughout the cold war and even after the end of it, writings and reports from both the governmental and non-governmental organisations continued to come arguing for and against the use of nuclear weapons for a limited war. In 1957, James King debunked the thesis that a nuclear war can be kept limited. Later, he was joined by Bernard Brodie and much later in the 1960s onwards by a number of writers. The idea was called 'unmitigated nonsense'. However, the relevance of nuclear weapons for limited war got a very prominent name and that was Henry Kissinger. For decades, he along with others kept arguing the significance of nuclear weapons to keep a war limited and deterrence credible and cost effective.

The Korean War gave another dimension to the discourse on limited war. The war refuted the idea that a limited war cannot be fought in the nuclear age. The Korean War was generally accepted as a limited war by all standards. Even the involvement of the two hostile groups did not make it a total war. In fact, later declassified documents and other writings reveal that MacArthur wanted to make the war total because in his thinking there is nothing called limited war; according to him, there should be either total peace or total war. However, President Truman later wrote about the Korean War that "Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind; to prevent a third world

war and the terrible destruction it would bring to the civilised world."

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Contemporary writers on limited war are also struggling to define and understand limited war. The plethora of literature is confusing the policy and strategic communities both. On South Asia, too, we witness writings arguing the possibility and impossibility of a limited war in the nuclear age. In India, the Cold Start doctrine is discussed to promote the idea of a limited war; Pakistan, it seems, is putting an emphasis on tactical weapons to send a different signal on limited war.

Based on the cold war experience, the international community and even analysts in strategic studies assume that a conventional war between two nuclear armed countries or groups is impossible. It is propounded that any conflict between two nuclear entities will either immediately or subsequently escalate into a nuclear war. Is this true? Reality falsifies this hypothesis, which is essentially based on limited historical experience and erroneous logic.

India was forced to fight a war with Pakistan in 1999 when both the countries had gone nuclear. Pakistan infringed upon India's territorial sovereignty, its regular Army fought a war against the regular Indian Army and the Indian assault combined with international pressure forced Pakistan to withdraw its Army from the territory under Indian control. India did not use nuclear weapons when its territorial integrity was infringed, nor did Pakistan do so when faced with defeat.

Another question that comes up here is what is the guarantee that nuclear exchange will not take place in a future war because it did not take place the last time? Notwithstanding Pervez Musharraf's book *In the Line of Fire* and some of his officials' statements indicating military parity

between India and Pakistan, because of the latter's acquisition of nuclear weapons and South Asia becoming a nuclear flashpoint of the world, it has been reiterated time and again by Pervez Musharraf and his officials that a nuclear exchange in case of an India-Pakistan conflict can go out of control and as a result no sensible person from either side will allow this to happen. For them, it is an unthinkable situation. India can feel confident about the thinking capability of the current ruling class of Pakistan, which is well aware of the disastrous consequences that may result if it introduces nuclear weapons in a conflict.

There can be some apprehensions about the lunatic fringe or non-rational or jihadi elements, which have infiltrated the Pakistani nuclear establishment. Some may argue that these elements may manoeuvre the Pakistani government to get nuclear weapons introduced in the conflict. This argument can be nullified if one looks at the current conflict between the NATO forces led by the United States and Taliban / Al Qaeda elements. While the United States has bombed Taliban hideouts in Pakistan, there has been no nuclear retaliation from the 'insane' elements. It is common knowledge that for the Al Qaeda or Taliban forces the United States is currently enemy number one.

Associated with this is the issue of the ineffectiveness of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal in relation to the US predominance or even attacks on Pakistani territory. The international community is already aware of the arm-twisting of Pakistan after the 9/11 incident that has led to the tumbling of the entire terror strategy and policy that Pakistan pursued through the Taliban. Neither the Pakistani military regime nor the civilian government has had the courage to stand up to US belligerence.

Here, some may argue that this is because the United States is a formidable power with powerful war machinery. In fact, the logic of deterrence also underlines the threshold of 'unacceptable damage'

through a very small amount of nuclear weapons. Interestingly, this logic has been adopted by countries like India and China by calling it a 'minimum retaliating strike' or credible minimum deterrence. Even some US nuclear whiz-kids and policy-makers have acknowledged this possibility. And a nuclear weapons strike on NATO forces may lead to a different kind of psychological impact on Western public opinion and policy-making. Thus, such understanding of Pakistani inaction can be used to predict the future nuclear behaviour of Pakistan in a conflict with India as well.

Another argument is that if Pakistan feels or fears that its existence is under threat, it may use nuclear weapons. But this does not hold much ground as an Indian operation is unlikely to have the objective of permanent occupation or a merger of Pakistan with India. Yes, Pakistani existence may come under threat when it introduces nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict because it will then be certain that India will annihilate it with its nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Pakistan's signalling through tactical nuclear weapons development is not going to work. It knows all the ideas were championed by the American strategic community when the US had nuclear superiority. After the advent of nuclear weapons in other countries, the moderate voice regarding the battlefield use of nuclear weapons started emerging.

Thus, we find that even a brief history of the nuclear world demonstrates that limited war in a nuclear age is a possibility. The Pakistani nuclear blackmail is to end and for this, war as an option should be kept in mind. In the South Asian context, all the western theology has been proved wrong. Already, a limited war was fought in the region. The Korean experience also demonstrated that the complacency arising out of the possession of nuclear weapons leaves armed forces unprepared or under prepared. India should also not fall in this kind of situation which leaves it unprepared. 