Declared doctrines are seldom, the nuclear ones even less, the real or the practiced precepts. During the Cold War, NATO's nuclear doctrine, progressively called massive retaliation, flexible response, and lastly, unpredictable response; remained in essence always ambiguous. It was also eminently sensible. "Ambiguity deters" is the canon of all nuclear creed. India and Pakistan, too, have propounded some elements of their nuclear doctrines. These often have to be deciphered, and often differently.

'Maintaining minimum essential deterrence' has been set forth as the first principle by both the countries. Neither has given the number and type of weapons it believes would do the job. Rightly: as these are dynamic aggregates, and also because transparency mitigates the concept of deterrence. Both are not essentially thinking about minimum deterrence.

Pakistan understands the concept in terms of its ability to ensure, in case of an Indian first strike, survival of sufficient number of its assets to inflict "unacceptable damage" on the aggressor. It therefore intends to build a capacity that would create at least a "reasonable doubt" that it could so. India on the other hand argues that since it faced nuclear threats from Pakistan, as well as from China, it must have the ability to deter both of them. Implications for Pakistan of the two-front argument are two-fold. It makes assessment of the likely Indian holding more difficult. And, in case the two countries agreed to negotiate a nuclear balance, Pakistan would have a hard time finding a comfortable arrangement.

India's declared no first use of nukes is prudent. It helps mollify the detractors, unhappy with its nuclear path, and it registers the Country's confidence in its conventional deterrence. Of course, if India were ever to get desperate, the policy alone would not hold it back from firing the first nuclear salvos. Pakistan does not have the luxury of this "best of both worlds" option, militarily or psychologically.

To start with, a Pakistani policy of no-nuclear-preemption would not be credible. If we suspect that in a crunch, India could renge on its promised no first use; and if the US, despite its preeminent conventional power, was unwilling to forego this option; who would believe that Pakistan, if in trouble against a much larger adversary, would not use or threaten to use its "force equalizer"? Moreover, the nuclear abstinence prevents only a nuclear conflagration. If taken too seriously, it may actually encourage a major conventional conflict that Pakistan was equally keen to avoid. The people of a smaller country are also blissfully happy in the knowledge that if their "core interests" were threatened, the leadership had the will to defend them, as a last resort also with nuclear weapons.
Pakistan does not identify those core interests that, if threatened, could trigger a nuclear retort. That is hardly surprising. These are elements of operational planning, and stating them could betray a country's conventional limits. Defining nuclear thresholds is also hazardous business. It suggests to the other side when to preempt, and provides it ample justification if it did so. Starting a nuclear war is too hard a decision. In real life, one would be looking for any possible excuse not to make that choice. Laying down redlines can make such avoidance more difficult.

Indian strategic plan, the infamous Triad, to implement its apparently defensive doctrine (minimum deterrence and no first use), sounds rather aggressive. The contradiction can be explained if India's China argument was accepted. However, as the Soviet build-up to meet the perceived threats from east and south affected the West; the Triad, if developed, would create certain effects in Pakistan. It would be seen here more as an instrument of intimidation and preemption, than as minimum deterrence.

The magnitude of an arsenal matters. But the nuclear game, aptly described so often, is more than a matter of numbers. Even when preempting with superior arms, one must consider the consequences of any enemy weapons surviving the strike and hitting back. Mercifully, there does not seem to be a fail-safe method to eliminate the odds.

To make sure that all nukes in the enemy inventory were neutralized, one had to know their exact number and location at the time of attack, and ensure that the strike was totally effective. In forty years of their ill-will, the NATO and the Warsaw Pact developed and deployed thousands of nuclear weapons: primarily to insure that in successive strikes, it would be the other side that would run out of its inventory first. In the process, they amassed a capacity that could destroy each other and the rest of us five times over, but never got the desired assurance. India's projected Triad, though intimidating, had little chance of pulling it off. There must, therefore, be some other purpose that it is meant to serve.

Nuclear weapons serve, in the first place, a psychological purpose. When India started its nuclear programme, it faced no serious enough a threat from any country. During the worst phase of its relations with China, none of its core interests were at risk. Its hostility with Pakistan hardly necessitated a nuclear resort. In fact, the latter's likely response in kind- going nuclear- stood to erode India's advantage. India went nuclear in the belief that to be counted in the big league, or in the same class as China, it had to have the status of a nuclear power. Pakistan reacted primarily to give heart to its people, already a bit wary in the shadow of the Big Brother.

Our declared resolve, to use nuclear weapons to defend our vital interests, serves again, though not exclusively, a psychological end. We wish to reassure our people that we had the will to pull the nuclear trigger, and we want them to be prepared if we did. Though it makes our deterrence more credible, but deep-down we also know that regardless of what interests were threatened, marshalling the super-human will to blow up the region would not be easy. We therefore try our best not having to make that decision, and that includes keeping a potent conventional deterrence. The only
reason that Pakistan has not carried out the much expected, and for economic reasons the much needed, reduction in its armed forces, is the fear that it would lower the nuclear threshold.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, its nuclear variant that is, both India and Pakistan seem to have decided not to develop any tactical nuclear weapons. The main reason, once again, is a psychological one. Induction of these weapons would mean that not confident enough of our deterrence, we were now planning to fight a nuclear war. There are indeed some other reasons as well: costs; the military geography of the likely war zones- where even battlefield weapons can create strategic effects; and the wise conclusion by both sides that their use would rapidly escalate into a more serious exchange.

The cost and a little wisdom are also likely to guide the two countries in making some other doctrinal decisions. Pakistan will not be sucked into an arms race. It will instead concentrate on securing its nuclear assets to ensure survival of sufficient capacity that could adequately respond to an Indian first strike. And India would most likely build a more modest version of its Triad. Both of them will, however, continue to refine and improve their holdings, especially the delivery means.

Command and Control of weapons are important components of a nuclear doctrine. We have reasons to believe that the national command authorities on both sides are now fully functional. One of the main concerns addressed by the two countries right from the beginning was how best to prevent false alarms: a signal or a launch on one side, not aimed at the other, if misunderstood could trigger a nuclear strike. Both the militaries, I believe, have agreed on a method to take care of this problem.

Management of a nuclearised environment is full of contradictions. Nuclear weapons should serve the purpose without being fired, but they cannot do so unless one was prepared for their ultimate use. The nuclear powers, while getting ready for the worst, try to contain even minor conflicts, lest they acquired nuclear dimensions. To deter, the conventional capability has to be known, at times even shown. Nuclear deterrence on the other hand works best by influencing perceptions.

It is very unlikely that either India or Pakistan would pull the nuclear trigger. But just the doubt that they might do so, sends the intermediaries scrambling as soon as the tension builds up on the borders. The result is the ultimate contradiction: nukes preventing or containing wars, but the conflicts that might otherwise be settled by the use or threat of force, continuing. If nuclearisation creates such paradoxes, no one needs wonder that the resultant doctrines are so ambivalent.

But then who needs a cut and dried doctrine with inflexible redlines and robotic adherence! As long as we can keep these weapons well tucked away, not dangle them for the ends that they cannot achieve, and take a long time priming them; the Subcontinent could do without the nuclear dogma. In this respect, both India and Pakistan have had some useful hands-on experience. I believe the two of them have now learnt to live with the nukes, as well as with the problems. That is both good and bad news.