



RESEARCH PAPER

The Efficacy of Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: A Case Study of Pakistan and India

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: April 24, 2020	This study attempts to understand and explain the phenomenon of strategic stability which is closely associated with nuclear weapons and its deterrence. The study tries to evaluate the type of strategic stability that prevailed during the Cold War between the two superpowers and investigates any similarity to the strategic situation prevailing between Pakistan and India in the post-nuclear period. A process-tracing method provides the methodical framework of the study in which the various variables have been broken up and their cumulative effect has been measured to cast effect on the causality of the events that unfolded between Pakistan and India. Defensive Realism suggests that nuclear weapons provide the much-needed stability which rests upon the non-usage of these weapons thus providing a strategic equilibrium. The notion of strategic stability is fragile between Pakistan and India and nuclear-related fear which provides the foundation for nuclear deterrence is amply and maximally present between Pakistan and India.
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Introduction

Both India and Pakistan suffer a legacy of animosity which had set-in right after their independence. Any chance of peaceful coexistence between them has been overshadowed regularly by the historical hatred and political rivalry. The introduction of nuclear weapons by both the countries and the resultant effect on their mutual relations, therefore, needs a detailed and comprehensive analysis.

In 2004, India's military modernization drive and its proactive operations strategy put Pakistan under pressure taking countervailing measures. It conducted

extensive military exercises to hold the enemy back and incorporated the tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in its nuclear arsenal to negate any India military superiority. The Offensive strand of Realism depicts that with an increase in the power the aggressive behavior of the power-wielding state also increases resulting in that state becoming 'primed for offensive'. The current trends in South Asia could also be seen from this angle. The history of the past conflicts between these countries could provide a good starting point for analyzing what is in store for them in the strategic realm. During the 2001 crisis between the two states, the Indian army's lack of mobilization frustrated its military objectives forcing them to see for other venues which could surprise Pakistan and reduce the escalation dangers as well. As a result, India came up with the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) based on a fast-paced incision into Pakistani territory. The main punch of the CSD lay in its agility and promptness without disturbing the red lines of the enemy.

The warring parties needing to limit the scope of war and take unnecessary escalatory risks evident in other theaters of war also apply to the history of Indo Pakistan wars. During the Kargil war, India took escalatory steps of bringing its air force into the limited theatre of war which could have spiraled out of control if Pakistan had also resorted to similar measures. The Indian policymakers worried about the Kargil and 2001 crisis had to abandon the Sundarji doctrine taking CSD on board. This strategy centered on its lightning speed to meet its objectives within few days thus completely baffling Pakistan in the process. The implementation of the CSD which requires the channels of communications with the enemy, accepting the limits beyond the LOC or international border, and showing constraint in military weapons usage would invite complications and confusion.

In response to such military provocations, Pakistan came up with its beefed-up military exercises and the TNWs to prop up the existing defenses. This led to a stern warning by the head of the Indian nuclear advisory board in which India would overwhelmingly respond with nuclear weapons if Pakistan ever thought of using the TNWs during the war. Ironically, the Indian policymakers have himself negated the Indian stance of availability of space for limited war and vindicated Pakistani stance that no such space exists in the presence of nuclear weapons. In other words, Pakistan has been successfully able to checkmate the Indian design based on belligerence and arrogance in the nuclear field.

The Kargil war that was fought in the summers of 1999 was a classic example of stability instability paradox in which the possession of the nuclear weapons had encouraged at least one of the rivals to take matters into her own hands and make a bid at overturning the status quo but such an atmosphere was also fraught with the possibility of a nuclear accident in terms of nuclear brinkmanship getting totally out of control.

The two countries - during the Kargil adventure - went for the limited war geographic wise but the Indian side nevertheless took the major escalatory step of going ahead with the participation of the Indian air force which was a cross-chair move as far as the consequences were concerned. In that war the participation of the

Pakistani Air force could have been disastrous as nuclear weapons equipped aircraft in the war could have been a possibility – no matter from which side – as the conflict was bound to become mutually destructive if both the countries did not resist the temptation to go ahead with an escalation in claiming victory over the other.

The nuclear optimists believe – quite to the contrary – that both sides insisted on keeping the conflict limited which speaks about the functioning of nuclear deterrence. The critics however argue that it's not the point of the conclusion of the conflict but the entire process through which the conflict went by, could have easily turned into a nuclear Armageddon- at least in the region and beyond.

The quite unexpected conflict of Kargil was to be accompanied by another crisis of similar proportions in 2001-2002. The two countries readied their armed forces and their nuclear weapons in the aftermath of the war in that devastating crisis. The Indian side despite its rhetorical moorings and threats to vindicate against Pakistan could not pressure Pakistan, despite massive force deployment on the borders. The international community also promptly intervened in the crisis because the threat of a war with the potential to assume nuclear dimensions was quite real at that time.

The restraint and caution shown by both the countries were viewed with concerning alarm and great powers worked day and night to ensure that the conflict deescalates. Pakistan - after a crisis of ten months – pledged to rein in harder on the terrorist and shut down any alleged camps inside the IJK. In the end, the Indians were on the sentinel duty performing on the international border. Both sides claimed to have diplomatically won the battle without even shooting a single fire. The Pakistanis side stated that the nuclear capability of Pakistan was self-assuring in that the Indians were not able to cross the international border. The Indians were quite satisfied and sold it to their nations that Pakistan was forced to pledge that another terrorist attack would see the Indian patience running thin. This prompted some alarm bells to go off in Pakistan and so, therefore, India emerged successful as there was no other attack on the Indian soil.

The debate between the nuclear optimists and the pessimists in describing the situation and the conflicting analysis of the processes and the outcomes of these crises is most revealing. The optimists believe that the nuclear factor had a stabilizing effect on the eventual outcome of these crises and nothing untoward had happened in the final analysis. The internecine nature of the conflict-according to the nuclear optimists- had led to major reevaluation by the policymakers in both the countries and thus sagacity had prevailed.

The nuclear pessimists believe that before arriving at the outcome of these crises, a precarious process had to be passed by both the countries in which the fear of nuclear escalation was all the more apparent. The pessimist believes that during the tense process of these crises, there were many instances where matters could have gone awry due to miscalculation, accident, misperception, or inadvertence. This could have

resulted in a major catastrophe in the presence of nuclear weapons and thus over-reliance on nuclear deterrence in South Asia is fraught with dangers.

The Compound Crisis of 1990

Pakistan India relations were marked by hostility but a stable pre-1990 period. However, in that period the crisis was the most intense period in their relations to date (Chari, Cheema & Cohen, 2003: 32). The crisis of 1990 was also known as the 'compound' or 'composite' crisis saw the USSR dismembering after its long drawn out war in Afghanistan and the emergence of the US as a great power intent on disengagement from the region (Fair, 2014: 132).

With the internal situation worsening in Indian held Kashmir, India started implicating Pakistan for supporting the insurgency. To quell the allegedly Pakistan backed turmoil in Kashmir and also in Punjab, India stationed first its paramilitary and then military forces in Kashmir in August 1989 (Fair, 2014: 133). In response to the Brasstacks, Pakistan started exercising with its own largest military maneuvers (Fair, 2014: 134). The results of these exercises were quite convincing for the Pakistani side that the armed forces of the country could engage in a large scale war in the conventional field and could mount even offensive at will, thanks to the modern electronic warfare equipment and the air defense equipment used in the role of anti-tank weapons given by the US (Chari, Cheema & Cohen, 2003: 116). Furthermore, many Indian troops had arrived home, dejected and crestfallen, from the botched counterinsurgency operations in Sri Lanka at that critical moment (Chari, Cheema & Cohen, 2003: 118).

General Sundarji had predicted then that Pakistan was very close to the threshold level in terms of fashioning a nuclear device and that his military intelligence was not sure on which side of the threshold Pakistan had stood at that time. He was also of the opinion that the best course for the Indian Army in the light of the available information was to gear itself up for any eventuality and the best course available in those circumstances was to rapidly modernize the three leg of the armed forces and not confine the modernization to any one of the services (Sundarji, 1980).

Analysts of strategy also believed that by the end of 1988, the Pakistani policymakers were quite confident with regards to their nuclear capability and that confidence was implicit in their talks of how effective nuclear deterrence was in controlling the happening of the war (Spector, 1990: 100).

Seymour Hersh, a leading investigative journalist, published a report in which he made several ominous statements with regards to the crisis evolving in 1990. Later, however, these findings were denied by the very sources which he had included in his report as a reference. Hersh contends that in the spring of 1990, General Beg had authorized the assembling of nuclear weapons because of the tense situation developing in Kashmir in 1990 (Hersh, 1993: 2).

Nuclear Stability and Diplomacy

A more tenable logic seems to be that the American authorities were concerned at the situation developing between India and Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir having nuclear overtones. The American intelligence had informed President Bush that Pakistan had resumed enriching uranium and may have made some headway in the delivery of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the ambassadors based in these countries relayed a calmer report regarding the situation and downplayed war scare, either conventional or nuclear (Krepon&Farooqi, 1995: 5).

Americans believed that nuclear weapons were lurking in the background of the crisis. That was coupled with the possibility of a conventional war breaking out in which India would be able to threaten Pakistan by making early gains in the conflict. This scenario could have resulted in Pakistan issuing a nuclear threat, forcing the Indian side to escalate conventionally and rapidly, thus extirpating the possibility in which Pakistan may employ nuclear weapons (Hagerty, 1995:77) So the American officials were concerned that nuclear weapons could play a role in escalating a conventional war between India and Pakistan thus worsening the regional security environment.

The role of American preventive diplomacy, in providing a way to both India and Pakistan to back off from the brink of war instead of kowtowing from any side, was an important factor. Both countries appreciated the Robert Gates commission which helped stabilize the situation (Krepon&Farooqi, 1995: 7). The senior Pakistani military officials started hinting the actual functioning of nuclear deterrence in South Asia somewhere since 1988. But the Indian side was slow to appreciate such findings. However, the Kashmir crisis brought a wholesale change in Indian discourse and only now the Indian strategic analysts grasp the dampening of war possibilities be associated with nuclear deterrence in South Asia since 1990 (Krepon&Farooqi, 1995: 9).

Subhramunyam pointed out that mutual caution and restraint directly transpires with the knowledge that each side is capable of fashioning nuclear weapons at short notice. That kind of caution is already seen with India. Before the arrival of nuclear weapons, and the launch of Operation Gibraltar by Pakistan, India boldly escalated the war to a full scale and attacked the international border. In 1990, however Pakistani attempts to penetrate insurgents into Kashmir, led to Indian actions confined to its side of the border, dealing with the problem on its territory and never contemplated taking the war into Pakistani Kashmir (Subhramanyam, 1993: 188).

This notion is also agreed to by the former Army Chief of Staff of India. K. Sundarji who maintained that in the wake of Nuclearization, the prospects of a conventional war between the two countries have receded significantly. In his views, the existence of nuclear deterrence has taken away the option of aggressively crossing the international border, in the wake of provocation from the other side. The nuclear equation has dissipated the chances of reacting all out in the conventional field (Hagerty, 1998: 210).

The Kargil Conflict 1999

After overt Nuclearization of South Asia, both Pakistan and India embroiled in a brief but high pitched conflict in contested Kargil sector of Kashmir. In the spring of 1999, 800 Pakistani soldiers and irregular troops captured some strategic snowy peaks of Kargil in the Indian controlled Kashmir. With this maneuver, Pakistan was able to enjoy an adventitious position to destroy the Indian supplies by bombarding the Indian National Highway I A. This crucial highway led to the forces in Siachen glacier and other sensitive regions between Ladakh and China (Vinayak ,1999). Confident of the ground assault and little awareness of the gravity of the situation, the Indian air force (IAF) was not called into action initially. But the mounting number of casualties of the Indian army and failure to reverse infiltrator's gains, the decision was taken to give India a 'freehand' (Joshi &Baweja, 1999). The ultimate decision was taken to restrict the conflict and sustain the operation on the Indian side of Kashmir. The decision not to widen the action was taken due to the fear of escalation and diplomacy was given a chance which could have accrued larger gains to India as compared to war (Hagerty, 1995: 214) The decision was taken to involve the IAF which started to pound the intruder's positions and despite the loss of two jets and a helicopter the air operations persisted (Vinayak, 1999: 9).

The Kargil episode remained a unique affair in the history of the Pakistan India conflict as it never degenerated into total war. It was unique because both India and Pakistan restrained their actions and came back from the situation from where-hitherto- there was no history of turning back and both the countries escalated the war, engaging each other totally (Joeck, 2009: 19).

As far as India was concerned, her pinioned response came due to three reasons. First, the Indian worries that the conflict could escalate and take a nuclear dimension. Secondly, India calculated that restraint would pay off diplomatically far more than the military option, and third, the attempts were being made to diplomatically seclude Pakistan and make it a target of international opprobrium for hastening a crisis with nuclear overtones (Joeck, 2009: 20).

Despite this calmness from the Indian side, the two sides agreed that the escalation and the related pressures were too high on both the governments and their relative militaries. The nuclear deterrence in this case had backfired if the Pakistani establishment had taken the Indian patience for granted and had thought that the possession of nuclear weapons would also give them the prize of the possession of the Kargil heights. General Malik of India had also opined that the Pakistani side failed to understand the resolve of the Indian side and in fact, it was never figured out very carefully by the Pakistani Kargil planners (Malik, 2002).

When the crisis initiated, the Indian side was caught in a surprise act and could not figure out that a large number of infiltrators aided by the Pakistani side have come to occupy Indian Territory this deep and pace of the infiltration was so robust. So the government had taken some time to come out of the strategic shock that was inflicted by the miscreants on those heights (Government of India 2000). By invoking the IAF,

and reversing the earlier decision of non-employment of the air force, India moved to the next rung of the escalation ladder. The Indian government vowed to go ahead with a relentless air campaign until all the territory was reoccupied and blamed Pakistan for taking the escalatory measures (The Hindu, 1999).

With the rise in military tensions due to involvement of IAF, General V. P. Malik evinced toughening up of Indian stance and spoke of even taking the war across the Line of Control (LOC) in pursuance of supreme national interest and the decision to escalate the war residing with the Indian cabinet (Chandaran, 2004: 18). Islamabad while worried that India may adopt such a provocative strategy, also asserted a similar approach. Pakistani foreign minister at that time, Sartaj Aziz issued a veiled threat of using nuclear weapons if needed and taking 'all necessary actions' to defend itself. The belligerent rhetoric emanating from both sides further elevated the conflict to new heights (Chandaran, 2004: 19).

The Indian and the Pakistani saber-rattling moves had made the threats of escalation and miscalculation heightened and the aggressive measures taken by the Indian side had been responsible for a similar kind of counter moves by Pakistan. The Indian high command in charge of the political and the military decisions had not only accepted the Indian air force move with regards to their operations but had also given a green signal to the Indian land forces and the navy to be ready to partake in the operations that were limited but the Indian decisions could have escalated it at any given time of the conflict. The Indian army chief thought it to be a good idea of building up the Indian armed formation not only in Kargil but also along the border with Pakistan and coastline (Chari, Cheema & Cohen, 2003: 111).

This was deemed to be a major escalatory step taken by the Indian side in which the Indian land forces were also allowed to span out along the entire length and breadth of the Line of Control in a signal that was to have an implicit impact of broadening the scope of the war. The involvement of the Indian navy as well as armed forces in case the pressure mounted by Pakistan becomes unbearable was implicitly laden with the threat of escalation - if intended or not (Chengapa 1999: 123). India apart from galvanizing all its three services also "activated all its three types of nuclear vehicles and kept them at what is known as Readiness state 3- meaning that some nuclear bombs would be ready to be mated with delivery vehicles at short notice" (Chengapa 199: 216).

New Delhi first denied that its military preparations were geared for total war with Pakistan. But she accepted that some 'defensive measures' have been taken in that regard. However, according to later revelations, India had geared up its military preparations to account for total war in case of escalation, and the same orders were also reportedly sent by the Indian army chief of staff. The Indian forces were ordered to be vigilant and prepared for a gradual or sudden rise in hostilities, thus leading to an open conflict (Malik 2006). Islamabad had also taken counterbalancing measures to parry any Indian impending attack. It was feared that Pakistan may be preparing to deploy nuclear weapons when the crisis had escalated (Talbot, 2004).

After the American nuclear diplomacy, the two countries came back from the brink of war, and thus a possible nuclear deterrence failure was averted (Chakma 2011). So at the behest of American mediation which was due to concerns of conflict escalation, having nuclear dimension, Pakistan decided to pull back all its troops across the LOC in the spirit of Simla agreement (Ahmad, 2005).

Pakistan in the face of open nuclear weapons capability- feel more confident to check Indian expansionist designs and would be less threatened by Indian conventional military edge (Kapur, 2007: 19). Owing to this confidence, Pakistani decision-makers even crossed into Indian Territory (Kapur, 2007: 22).

Retrospectively, the Kargil war also appears to have demonstrated 'mirror-imaging' on the part of Pakistan. The Pakistani decision-makers calculated that as Pakistan had not thought of a major military offensive against India in Siachen sector (captured by India in 1984) India would be expected to behave similarly thus being dissuaded from mounting a major operation against Pakistan if some important sectors were captured in Kargil region (Joeck, 2009: 23). But as the subsequent events showed, India was not pinioned from escalating the conflict at least in the theatre of war, and to reoccupy the lost territory resorted to a full-fledged military campaign. John Gill noted that India carefully kept the option of potential escalation deliberately open, strengthened by the public statements of high ranking Indian officials (Gill, 2009). Nevertheless, the Indian decision to escalate the war at the point of attack and introduction of air assets during the conflict formulated a situation in which major escalation could have resulted (Joeck, 2009: 145). That could have resulted in a major confrontation because of the nuclear weapons arsenal of the two countries. If Pakistan had also decided to involve its air force into the conflict, the chances of conflict escalation could not be discounted.

The Kargil episode in which nuclear weapons were clearly in the equation could not make the environment conducive for the Pakistani side. The Pakistani side could not occupy the Kargil heights because they had nuclear weapons and India had refused to be budged with the nuclear blackmail unleashed by Pakistan (Joeck, 2009: 149). A lesson that has dawned upon both the countries is that nuclear weapons do not preclude the war but kept it confined within some limits. The logic of nuclear deterrence would always paint a roseate picture supported by logic and rationality. Nevertheless, political leaders often have a tendency to act recklessly and wars also have a unique character of taking its course which may be radically different from what was originally planned. As such one can't be quite confident in answering issues such as how wars would be conducted and whether nuclear weapons would always remain in the background (Joeck, 2009: 148).

The Twin Peaks Crisis (2001-2002)

Pakistan and India confronted each other again after two and a half years. A tense military standoff began in December 2001 when armed militants attacked the Indian parliament and killed several guards. The attackers however were not able to kill the politicians present during the attack. India implicated terrorist organizations

supported by Pakistan to be behind the attack. Subsequently, India launched Operation Parakaram, deploying its strike formations consisting of armored tanks and heavy artillery pieces to the border. Three strike corps with 800,000 personnel were amassed on the border (Carranza, 2009: 29). IAF and satellite airfields were activated with IAF ready for attacking the terrorist camps in Pakistani controlled Kashmir within two weeks (Bedi, 2002).

The Indian navy also moved its eastern fleet stationed in the Bay of Bengal northwards towards the tip of the Arabian Sea. All communications were severed and overflight facility given to Pakistan was revoked. India had the “most massive military mobilization ever conducted” (Bajpai, 2009).

In May 2002, India was rocked with another attack where the militants orchestrated an attack on the army camp and killed several soldiers and their family members. This convinced many analysts that given the already tense situation on the border in which troops are amassed at the borders another war was imminent. India had no other way but to accept that position taken by the Pakistan side and guaranteed by the US. India accepted it to avert the war scare. The promises of the Pakistani leader, however, was not taken seriously but at that critical juncture Pakistan had not left much leeway for the Indian side and the nuclear weapons and ostensibly the Americans were the greatest obstacles in the Indian way of moving aggressively in the aftermath of the parliament and Kolchak attacks (Markey, 2013: 44).

The crisis finally subsided in October 2002. From an Indian perspective, she was able to put immense pressure on Pakistan- albeit indirectly through the USA- to stop funding and supporting the cross border terrorism (Fair, 2014: 46). So, Indian confidence with regards to the success of its preventive diplomacy grew even more, which in their view educed Pakistani pledge of non-support for the terrorist outfits. Pakistan on the other hand, linked Indian restraint and subsequent de-escalation with its nuclear weapons capability (Fair, 2014: 49).

USA was able to secure a promise from Pakistan in terminating the support for the terrorist outfits. On the other, Indians also heeded American advice, and restraint was shown. The nuclear optimists believed that the Indian decision to not wage war was the direct consequence of the overt nuclear weapons capability of the Pakistani side. Praween Swami an influential Indian journalist believed that, because of Pakistan’s misadventures, the Vajpayee Government had formulated plans to initiate military operations against Pakistan. (Kapur, 2007).

The nuclear proliferation pessimists don’t buy whatever good has been associated with regards to the conflict of 2001-2002 in the nuclear shades. They argue that the Indians did not mount an attack because the political objectives of stopping more attacks worked perfectly and after the Pakistani promises there were no more attacks with the US backing and providing the oversight to those pledges (Chacko, 2011).

Therefore the role of nuclear weapons was present in convincing both the parties in stopping from the challenging positions. The restraint put both on India and Pakistan saw to it that escalation remained controlled thus diplomacy and negotiations were given ample time. The nuclear war that could be the result of spinning out of control of the conventional war also prompted alarm bells in Washington and that power came forward to play its mediatory role

Conclusion

The nuclear weapons – both the camps agree – have profoundly changed the course of the strategic environment in South Asia between Pakistan and India. But these optimists and pessimists have been talking about the very different effects of the nuclear weapons in that the former see it as a stabilizing factor while the latter see it as dangerous elements that could go out of control and wreak havoc. It would also be revealed that it was the Indian side that had been in a state of denial long after the nuclear weapons had arrived in South Asia. This is understandable, as the advent of nuclear weapons had, to a great extent, marginalized Indian conventional superiority which she had mastered so painstakingly after years of strategic force buildup. But disavowing the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons and insistence on the possibility of fighting a limited conventional war with Pakistan in the presence of nuclear weapons seems to be a dangerous and precarious proposition for strategic stability.

The discussion has revealed that the Pakistani employment of the nuclear deterrence posture has been largely for the defensive purpose which has been able to guarantee its security vis-à-vis its much bigger rival. Faced with a situation in which the conventional asymmetry is in the favor of the Indians, nuclear weapons of Pakistan have been a sure thing to stop Indian projection of hegemony in the region.

Pakistan has attached its nuclear policy with its territorial integrity and has broadly outlined the general circumstances in which it may feel compelled to use the nuclear option. On the other hand Indian quest for finding space below the Pakistani nuclear threshold and fighting a limited war constitute an aggressive posture. India still seems to downplay the existence of nuclear weapons in South Asia and seems to rely on its conventional superiority against Pakistan to influence a strategic tilt in her favor. Such a faulty approach also forebodes ill for strategic stability in South Asia.

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