



NUCLEAR POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA: DETERRENCE NUANCES OF INDIA-PAKISTAN CRISES (MUMBAI TO PULWAMA)

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Abstract

This paper adopts an explanatory framework to study the evolving dynamics of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan with focus on strategic crises such as Mumbai (2008), Pathankot/Uri (2016), and Pulwama (2019). It posits that nuclear deterrence which took its roots from Cold War bloc politics has prevented full blown wars in dyadic nuclear equations. Nonetheless, the recurrent strategic crises in apparently balanced nuclear equations have exposed the limitations of nuclear deterrence at lower levels of conflict spectrum precipitating the concept of stability-instability paradox. In South Asian security milieu, India's strategic shift towards an incremental and assertive nuclear posture vis-à-vis Pakistan highlights the growing complexities of crisis management in a nuclear context. Pakistan has responded to growing threat perception by diversifying its response strategy by introducing novel concepts like full spectrum deterrence and quid-pro-quo plus as part of its nuclear posture. Within this paradigm the paper reviews the traditional deterrence theories, and emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of how deterrence functions in a quintessential India-Pakistan dyadic scenario. The increased frequency and severity of crises coupled with technological advancements create a highly unstable strategic environment in South Asia. The study concludes that achieving lasting strategic stability will require addressing core disputes, fostering diplomatic engagement, and reevaluating security doctrines to mitigate the risks of future crises spiraling into broader conflict.

Key Words: Dyadic Deterrence, Mutually Assured Destruction, Strategic Stability, Stability-Instability Paradox, India-Pakistan Crises.



Introduction

Strategic crises and escalations amongst states (with a potential to lead towards violent conflicts) are the main stay and core concerns of international relations since the inception of discipline in 1924. The empirical enquiries in this realm have pivoted around tracing the causes of conflicts and effective strategies to prevent outbreak of wars (Acharya & Buzan, 2019, p. 82). Navigating successfully through this complex strategic maze became further challenging, when nuclear weapons were introduced in the dyadic strategic interactions amidst the heightened bloc politics of Cold War. Since then, nuclear deterrence has emerged as a predominant theory for explaining conflict prevention and crisis stabilization in the realm of great power politics (Holloway, 2010, pp. 376–397). Nuclear deterrence since inception had a formidable challenge to prove its efficacy in political and military realms; later to be termed as general and immediate deterrence by the analysts (Mazarr, 2018, pp. 4–6). While referring to success of deterrence in military domain, it has to be capable of dissuading the rival nuclear states from initiating an all-out armed conflict, with a potential to lead a general war (Arbatov, 2020, pp. 65–86). This however was the minimalist objective in a dyadic nuclear deterrence equation. Towards the higher side of strategic continuum, successful deterrence equation was expected to sustain periods of lasting peace, curtailing the ability of nuclear dyad from getting political and military leverages over each other. The anticipated net outcome was required to shape the environment for negotiations and de-escalation (Huth, 1999, pp. 25–48).

In this classical sense, deterrence is reflected as a continuum, featuring maximalist, intermediary, and minimalist scales, which simplifies the explanation of the theory. Starting with maximalist scale and deterrence to be termed completely successful ought to reflect optimal reduction of conflicts; and even the events with nuclear overt threat signaling are scarcely bound to occur. Alternately, the comprehensive deterrence failure either entails full blown escalation, an all-out war – or conceding defeat by one of the dyads – acceding to the adversary’s maximalist demands. This strategic capitulation obviously has a price tag, but evades the utter destruction. The center point on this continuum, features as persistence of military skirmishes and the strategic use of threats as coercion tools. This intermediary state reflects neither an absolute success nor a total failure of deterrence. Hence, persists as a scenario of sustained strategic tensions between rival dyads that manages and de-escalates the conflict turning out to be total wars. During the Cold War period, Albert Wohlstetter and Patrick Blackett framed this contending discourse on maximalist versus minimalist approaches to deterrence. While, Wohlstetter's called for strong deterrence prowess vis-à-vis the Blackett's assertion for a moderate deterrence posture, which he saw as adequate for keeping fragile peace. These contending positions highlight the intricacies of deterrence theory, demonstrating how strategic preferences for nuclear strategy can differ significantly depending on the perceived level of threat and intended outcome in international relations. The Cold War debate between Albert Wohlstetter and Patrick Blackett over the requirements of effective deterrence remains highly relevant in contemporary period. Wohlstetter and Blackett presented systematic arguments for their maximalist and minimalist positions, respectively. The way the nuclear weapons states conceptualize these requirements influences their



nuclear weapons doctrines, forces, and postures. While the Wohlstetter-Blackett debate primarily relied on deductive logic, contemporary evidence from nearly seven decades of strategic behavior between nuclear rivals allows for a more empirical assessment (Basrur, 2014, pp. 1–5).

This corollary is amplified in India – Pakistan nuclear deterrence equation wherein an all-out war despite intense rivalry has withered, nonetheless, recurrence of strategic crises has emerged as new normal. There is also a stark dynamism and trajectory variance in recurrent patterns of instability and crises amongst the rival nuclear dyad. This trend of dynamism is more evident especially since Kargil’s episode of June 1999 up until Pulwama Crisis 2019. And each recurring crisis has introduced new facets and novel dimensions of deterrence paradigm (Lalwani et al., 2020). Nuclear analysts derive their intellectual feed for explaining the rising frequency of crises between nuclear-armed states through the lens of the stability-instability paradox. This paradox suggests that while nuclear deterrence provides overall strategic stability by preventing full-scale wars, it stimulates lower-level conflicts and crises, as states feel emboldened to engage in limited confrontations under the nuclear umbrella without fearing major escalation (Brewster, 2021). The overarching strategic stability, evident in the absence of an all-out war between the rival dyad, is widely viewed as a direct outcome of nuclear deterrence (Perkovich, 2013, pp. 21–40). Such scenarios underscore the complex role of nuclear weapons in preventing large-scale wars and influencing strategic calculations in South Asia. This complex interplay highlights the critical need for robust, empirically grounded theories that can better explain and predict the behaviors of nuclear-armed neighbors in a highly unstable strategic environment. Especially, since the ominous relationship between India and Pakistan under a nuclear overhang has raised the enormity of stakes beyond the regional scope inviting the heightened scrutiny and involvement of the major global powers (Krepon & Jones, 2004, pp. 25–54).

This paper endeavors to theorize the multifaceted dynamics of nuclear deterrence and draw relevance to the contemporary strategic crises between India and Pakistan. It posits that nuclear deterrence has played a crucial role in maintaining strategic stability and controlling escalation amidst recurring conflicts and substantial challenges. This study aims to provide a robust explanatory framework that elucidates the intricate linkages between the presence of nuclear weapons and the recurrent strategic crises within the South Asian regional context. To systematically explore this topic, the research addresses the evolution of the strategic environment in South Asia in the period post Mumbai Incident – 2008. It particularly focuses on the role of nuclear weapons in shaping deterrence, strategic stability, and escalation control between India and Pakistan in the said period. By addressing these critical questions, the paper aspires to offer a comprehensive analysis of the profound impact nuclear deterrence has on strategic stability and crisis management in the volatile region of South Asia, thereby setting the stage for further scholarly investigation into this pivotal aspect of international relations.

Theoretical framework

The cardinal of nuclear revolution theory posits that nuclear weapon states are least likely to enter



into conflict with each other. This argument is pivoted on three core assumptions (1) Fear of reciprocally assured destruction, which subsumes that military conflict have become cost prohibitive among nuclear-armed rivals (2) Military annihilation of a nuclear armed nation not possible with the conventional forces notwithstanding comparative conventional military strengths (3) Nuclear dyads will find maintaining status quo in strategic relations as more plausible option (Jervis, 1989, pp. 8–9). Basing on these assumptions nuclear revolution theory posits that crises between rival nuclear powers have become a rarity. Robert Jervis has developed an elaborate theory from a simple assumption that “*No one can win an all-out nuclear war*”. He has precluded the applicability of any conventional strategic thought process that dwells on equating nuclear weapons with other weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons have no other military utility, other than to prevent the outbreak of conflicts. Jervis believes that threat of mutual annihilation in the garb of assured second strikes has paradigmatically altered the foundation of statecraft. The mere possibility of nuclear war, and the significant destruction it would entail, is likely to deter states with nuclear capabilities from escalating conflicts beyond a certain threshold. The basic ingredient of the theory of nuclear revolution is that “*nuclear war is neither certain nor impossible [yet it is impossible to win in a nuclear war]*”. (Jervis, 1989, p. 266)

Critics of this theory argue that even in a scenario of mutually assured destruction (MAD), states continue their security-seeking behaviors. During the Cold War, the two rival blocs persisted in enhancing their nuclear war plans despite the presence of MAD. This strategic jostling by rival nuclear dyads for advantages led to multiple low-intensity crises, where states avoided direct confrontation and instead resorted to indirect means of conflict. These indirect crises among nuclear powers precipitated the concept of stability/instability paradox. Colin S. Gray was amongst the pioneers who challenged the idea that nuclear deterrence must solely rely on the threat of total mutual annihilation to prevent war. He vied for flexible and detailed planning that can adapt to a variety of scenarios beyond the binary outcome of total war or peace, providing a basis for contemporary discussions on how nuclear doctrines and policies should be shaped in an increasingly complex international environment. Gray called for reevaluation of nuclear strategy that aligns more closely with actual military and political goals rather than adhering to an outdated and potentially dangerous doctrine (Gray, 1979, pp. 54–87). Hence, the critical view underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of nuclear deterrence that considers the specific capabilities and strategic environments of smaller nuclear powers. It challenges the traditional MAD framework to adapt to the realities of a multipolar nuclear world where the stakes and strategic calculations may differ significantly from those of the Cold War era (Payne, 1996, pp. 15–27).

Strategic stability and its linkage to stability / instability paradox

Robert Jervis has offered an objective formula for describing this paradigm in his seminal book, *The Illogic of Nuclear Strategy* (1984) as he posits that

“To the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.” (Jervis, 1988, pp. 147–150)

He has dwelt upon the stability-instability paradox and lays before us a unique understanding of



the concept. Jervis writes that apparently the core logic of stability/instability paradox seems sound, nonetheless it often become misleading if strategic stability induced by nuclear deterrence is viewed through this narrow lens and defined as an absolute zero chance of crisis, escalation and minor conflicts. He pleads that it is not merely the presence of nuclear weapons and strategic stability that exacerbates the likelihood of conventional or sub-conventional wars between the nuclear dyad. Jervis takes it as a utopian interpretation of deterrence stability, induced by nuclear weapons and an absolute zero chance of conventional or sub-conventional conflict as an impracticable phenomenon (Jervis, 1989, p. 266). Even in the case of an extremely robust deterrence stability scenario, the intended or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons cannot be fully ruled out. The repercussions of an inadvertent limited nuclear war are quite intense, and may lead to a full fledge nuclear war. According to this analogy, even when a high degree of deterrence stability exists and the positioning of opposing forces does not encourage preventive or preemptive actions, one of the rival dyads may still be tempted to launch a limited nuclear attack. Else, due to the failure of default settings, the nuclear protagonists may tend to employ nuclear weapon inadvertently. The hypothetical lens lent by nuclear revolution theory in case of India – Pakistan is pertinent, since despite the nuclear factor the two dyads are locked in an intense zero-sum strategic competition. Their respective nuclear arsenals are poised threateningly against each other and crises continually simmer between the dyad at all times (Gray, 1979, pp. 54–87). This theory hence equips us with a productive framework and right kind of tools for addressing some rudimentary queries regarding the functionality of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan. The stability / instability paradox framework qualifies a link between deterrence stability and recurrence of conflict at lower levels of escalation, hence provides suitable empirical analogy for India-Pakistan conflictive case study.

Concepts amplified - Coercion – Compellence and Deterrence

Coercion espouses both explicit and implicit threats and corresponding ability to levy such costs on the target that is unbearable if it doesn’t submit to the will of coercer (Payne, 1996, pp. 15–27). Coercion is one of the permanent factors in the way states conduct themselves in international relations, especially powerful and nuclearized states. Thomas Schelling posits that "Most conflict situations are essentially bargaining situations. They are situations in which the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make (Jervis, 1988, pp. 147–150)."

Coercion as a preferred state strategy has mixed results with reference to its successes and fiascos in strategic interactions between different actors. Quite often material power that manifests as strong-armed forces does not offer requisite leverage in crisis against comparatively weaker side. For instance, United States did not succeed in 1990/1991 Gulf War to persuade Saddam Hussein from withdrawing his ground forces from Kuwait. United States has consistently failed to coerce the Iran since 1979, despite superior military strength ratio. Israelis have failed to coerce Hezbollah, a non-state actor much inferior in numerical strength. Alternately, weaker powers frequently employ asymmetrical coercion as strategy against stronger adversaries. By the same



analogy nuclear capable states despite their numerical inferiority vis-à-vis stronger nuclear rivals often succeed in coercion; North Korea and Pakistan have successfully deterred conventionally superior opponents like United States and India from initiating offensives actions. An effective coercer has the leverage to modify the distribution of power in a system with fringe reputational benefits. Failure of coercion may also result in permanent forfeiture of the threat with receding relative power vis-à-vis an adversary putting at stake the credibility for subsequent coercive threats. Coercion has two prime variants namely compellence and deterrence.

Compellence. Constitutes overt threats to employ force in order to pressurize an actor to take a confirmatory yet visible regressive action. An example is a state threatening to undertake military action if the adversary does not withdraw its forces from a conflict. Dr. Z. N. Jaspal has deliberated upon nuclear compellence as “*the use of nuclear threats to coerce an adversary to carry out a favorable action*” (Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, 2020). Nuclear compellence to be successful mainly is reliant on credibility of challenger’s threats to compel the opponent for compliance. Nevertheless, traditionally nuclear weapons have dubiously been seen as effective tools of compellence as these neither have any intrinsic value for physical conquest nor can they be employed as minimalist punishment tools.

Deterrence. Deterrence essentially is a subset of coercion, which is described as an ability either to persuade or dissuade someone to do something, that he/she otherwise doesn’t desire to do or from preventing someone to do something that is undesirable. It espouses overt or covert threats of use of force to pressurize an actor not to undertake a certain undesirable action. An example is any state posturing a massive nuclear retaliation to an adversary that plans to use nuclear weapons against it, thus coercing the adversary to abort its plans. Deterrence is an age old social and political concept that persists across all tiers of interaction. Apparently qualitative in its genesis, it definitely has an objective value that can be gained by acquiring the capability to inflict on opponent a punishment that is un-acceptable for the later “*the expected reaction of the opponent may result in one’s own severe punishment.*” (Waltz & Sagan, 2003, p. 5) The presence of an unambiguous retaliatory strikes’ capability dissuades the potential aggressor, who will be deterred to use conventional or nuclear forces against a numerically inferior adversary, primarily due to enormity of stakes involved. Alternately, for a weaker side pitched in strategic competition against a comparatively stronger side, the absence of credible risk of the second strike can encourage the stronger side to use conventional or nuclear forces by design to achieve its political objectives; stakes being acceptable. John J. Mearsheimer reflects on strategy of deterrence as

“In its broadest sense, [deterrence] mean persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks.” (Mearsheimer, 1983, p. 14)

The scholastic discourse in international politics revolving around the concept of deterrence is primarily concerned with the dire strategic competitors, wherein each attempt to dissuade other from taking any undesirable action. As Dr. Jaspal writes:



“These attempts to deter undesirable acts are essentially psychological in nature instead of obstructing or preventing physically a particular course of action.” (Jaspal, 2009, pp. 23–36)

Henry Alfred Kissinger an American politician, diplomat, and geopolitical consultant who served as United States Secretary of State and National Security Advisor elaborates that “*The Nuclear age turned strategy into deterrence, and deterrence into an esoteric intellectual exercise.*” Dr. Keith B. Payne, Director National Institute for Public Policy, Missouri State University dwells as following on the concept of deterrence and its requirements:

“There is no easily-calculable metric to define deterrence requirements because such assessments must now include a wide spectrum of opponents, contingencies and possible stakes/goals, all of which may shift as new threats emerge and old threats decline or re-emerge (Payne, 2010, pp. 1–22).”

Hence, it can be delineated that deterrence welcomes the perspective that merely the risk of prospective retaliation is the chief restraining factor in an adversary’s psychological domain. Expanding this very concept to nuclear age it can be concluded that deterrence rests on the argument of risking the nuclear attack in retaliation - that prevents the antagonists from using.

Redux of Cold War deterrence vis-à-vis India – Pakistan contemporary deterrence

During cold war two opposing blocs were pitched in a tight strategic competition under the overarching nuclear deterrence overhang. Strategic stability was the desired objective of both the blocs; however, they found it to be cumbersome and whatever stability was maintained, was attributable to nuclear weapons. Throughout the cold war the opposing dyads were jockeying for credibility of threat posed by them and general deterrence remained intact. Nonetheless, despite success of general deterrence the immediate deterrence remained under severe stress. Resultantly overarching strategic scenario remained tense owing to short to medium term instability especially at lower thresholds of conflict spectrum (Krepon, 2003, pp. 2–3). Initially the technologies and capabilities of competing nuclear dyads of cold war were nascent and mutual mistrust regarding the intentions was at peak. It induced both the blocs to up-grade their weapon capabilities with improvements in technology. The consequence of this strategic competition for nuclear supremacy was tremendous improvement in missile technology, strategic bombers, supremacy of delivery means manifested into extended missile ranges, improved accuracies, exploration of space, and ballistic missile shields. Ironically however, despite these advancements in strategic capabilities the concomitant instability also exacerbated in leaps and bounds between US and USSR. Subsequently however, after the initial rush of blood cooled down, a realization emerged on either side regarding the consequence of this madness of arms race and insecurity it was generating. The period post 1962 (in aftermath of Cuban Missile-Crisis) saw number of arms control agreement between two blocs. Significant treaties of 1960s are Partial Nuclear Ban Treaty, Outer Space Treaty and NPT. The important arms control treaties of are SALT 1, ABM Treaty and SALT II (Wisotzki & Kühn, 2021, pp. 183–194). The strategic competition thereafter manifested into indirect



confrontation and proxy wars and the territories of less developed countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan became the battle grounds for the two opposing blocs (Ott, 2021).

In case of India – Pakistan (unlike the Cold War scenario), one finds a legacy of bloody wars, innumerable border skirmishes and irredentist disputes. Regionally the presence of third mutually inclusive nuclear armed neighbor China and another nuclear aspirant Iran, further complicates the nuclear equation. Geographically, population and military strength wise there is a significant asymmetry between India and Pakistan. Immediate neighborhood and geographical contiguity between Indian- Pakistan means no warning or reaction time. The legacy of mistrust and interplay of multiple domestic and foreign variables subject the nuclear deterrence in India – Pakistan equation to recurrent crisis instabilities. Unlike Cold War, the non-state actors have an enduring role in stirring up the instability. The leadership in these states tend to pass occasional flamboyant public statements on use of nuclear weapons. Masses on either side of borders are generally oblivious of the impending catastrophe of possible nuclear exchange. Barring initial few CBMs, no significant arms control treaty has been signed between the rival dyad till the writing of these lines. With these stability snags the period post overt nuclearization in South Asia turned out to be tumultuous as multiple crisis kept the strategic environment on fire. Although these crises started on different nodes each had two rider clauses (1) nuclear dimension played a significant role in keeping these crises within controllable thresholds (2) Kashmir remained as the bedrock of each of the crisis (Hussain, 2009, pp. 1007–1035). Another perilous feature of Cold War nuclear rivalry was wide dispersion of nuclear weapons that were deployed across the breadth of globe as a component of “forward defense and prepositioning strategies” with the concept to curtail the response time to use these in time of need. The probable list of locations where these weapons were kept is surprisingly very long and included countries in North America, East and West Europe and Asia (Coleman & Siracusa, 2006, pp. 113–114).

There is also school of thought that argues that the initial period of covert nuclearization displays a degree of restraint and rationality by the two dyads, when seen in comparison to US and USSR. Basrur a renowned Indian scholar argues that vis-à-vis cold war, India – Pakistan nuclear deterrence has proved to be more resilience in the initial twenty years of covert nuclearization (Ashraf et al., 2019).

The prerequisites of deterrence stability stipulated by Waltz in India / Pakistan deterrence context apparently seem fulfilled. Survivability – both India and Pakistan seemingly bear adequate safety of weapons/delivery systems. The antagonists also have a fairly assured degree of second strike and are equipped with nuclear submarines and MIRVs. Accidental use of nukes – most likely both are keeping critical weapon components de-mated. This de-mated arrangement provides sufficient time allowance to decision makers while reacting to stemming threats. Hence, the risk of accidental/premature delivery is minimal. Effective command and control system - India - Pakistan are force-in-being and therefore have developed comprehensive command/control mechanisms (Mishra & Ahmed, 2014).



Deterrence stability in India – Pakistan Scenario

Deterrence, an extension of strategy of coercion is said to be functional when one actor successfully persuades another actor to not enter in an undesirable domain by threatening unto him unacceptable costs against the latter’s intended actions. Compellence is another albeit, more offensive variance of coercion strategy involving direct threats on the opponent, to perforce change its behavior. This veiled or obvious threat signaling between nuclear armed rivals embeds high stakes in strategic interaction for prospective aggressor. The primary corollary of nuclear deterrence is referred to US – Soviet strategic interaction prevalent erstwhile in Western theater. Albeit, since the advent of so called “second nuclear age” the focus of nuclear rivalry has shifted entirely to South Asian – Subcontinent region with far greater and complex challenges confronting the basic functioning of an otherwise simplistic deterrence theory (Toon et al., 2019). The region comprising Pakistan and India has enormous geostrategic vitality. It is a home to around one fifty million people yet is marred by an enduring conflict and recurrent crises. Sustainable peace in the region has become far-fetched dream. This conflict driven region has regional and systemic undertones. Regionally the irredentist disputes owing to unjust implementation of partition plan and ideology driven conflicts have been the pretext of recurring crises (Paul & Saideman, 2008). Contextually speaking the deterrence in India – Pakistan context faces unique set of phenomena with a peculiar regional security milieu. This uniqueness is attributable both in theoretical and practical context (Sridharan, 2005). Notwithstanding complexities, nuclearization of the region has brought a semblance of stability in strategic relationship between India – Pakistan. The latter being conventionally and numerically inferior somehow succeeded in evading security dilemma and achieved near parity in nuclear weapons domain vis-à-vis militarily and materially stronger rival - India. However, this strategic equivalence poses a challenge to militarily superior India as its quest to alter the prevailing strategic stability status quo is a continuous undermining feature for the regional stability equation. The acquisition of state-of-the-art technologies namely, the ballistic missile shield, MIRVs and cutting edge SLBM technology are all Indian endeavours to offset deterrence stability and establish military domination in the region (Jaspal, 2018). These unilateral ventures are pushing the region toward precarious deterrence failure and inducing Pakistan in arms race.

India – Pakistan deterrence conundrum within context of regional and extra regional linkages

Strategic interaction between India – Pakistan is not a square one on one equation especially with reference to nuclear deterrence stability because of following factors:

- The presence of a third powerful nuclear armed common neighbor adds a special flavor to the recipe of stability – instability. China's escalating economic and strategic expeditions in the region manifest alternatively in case of Pakistan and India. In case of the former through its multibillion dollar “Belt and Road Initiative” China is incentivizing Pakistan economically and strengthening its infrastructural domain. While in case of later, China has a legacy of periodic strategic crises and the June 2020 Ladakh Crisis is the point in the case. The Chinese latest



initiatives threaten to block a strategic Darbuk–Shyok- Daulat Beg Oldi road link close to the Line of Actual Control. During the last encounter China practically blocked the Indian troops from patrolling to the east of this vital road link. It was reported that this amounted to a loss of around 900 square kilometers of territory to India (Singh, n.d.).

- The recurrent US presence in Afghanistan right at the door of Pakistan since decades complicates this strategic maze further. With the gradual icing of Indo – China relations and latter’s failed attempts to effectively deter China, India tried to gain traction from entering into a strategic partnership with the United States. Hence, this strategic triangle that apparently has three corners i.e. China, India and Pakistan have an extra regional linkage which is manifested through US influence in the region further implicating the strategic dynamics in Southern Asia (Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017).
- The nuclear deterrence between India – Pakistan, postulates an incongruity of views by analysts regarding the impact of vertical and lateral proliferation of competing nuclear capabilities. As per Waltz the soundness of deterrence theory augments the proposition of proliferation of nukes in deterring conflicts far all times to come (Hagerty, 1995). For Waltz no nuclear state will resort to preemption due to pragmatism and cautious approach. Shelling and Sagan however, do not buy this argument and build up their case against proliferation of nukes as they consider it perilous for global security, and if more and more states will lay their hand on nuclear weapons the probability of accidental or inadvertent use will also increase (Sagan & Waltz, 2002). The camp of non-proliferators believes that whenever a nascent nuclear state becomes a member of this elite club it has more propensity for pre-emption. This inducement towards pre-emption is precipitated by insecurity regarding their fragile command and delivery infrastructure against the surprise attack by an opposing dyad. As these states grow and their survivability gets better and they acquire capability of second strike, their propensity and eagerness for pre-emptive strike also subside with time.

India – Pakistan Crises (Mumbai 2008 To Pulwama 2019) & Analyses

Since the overt nuclearization of India – Pakistan there has been a series of recurrent strategic crises between India and Pakistan. The resolve and capabilities reflected by the actors triggering the incidents and rival dyad in the case of each crises diverged hence, the response parameters and dynamics of functionality of deterrence also altered diametrically. There is however, one common conclusion that despite, major mobilization of forces, minor skirmishes, sporadic rush-of blood, artillery duels at Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, and varying claims of tactical successes, none of these crises led to a major conflict starting from 1999, 2001/2002, 2008, 2016 and 2019 (Paul & Khan, 2008). The core question however, brings our focus on overriding factors of instability in this ever-turbulent relationship. The ensuing part of this paper offers a summary of three recurrent crises between India and Pakistan from 2008 to 2019. The analysis portion of each scenario presents a synthesis of relevant variables that are taken from multiple sources in order to explore the empirical pretexts for repeated India – Pakistan crises in the given timeframe. The paradox of stability/instability will be pitched against the obtaining environments of the time-period in case of each crisis, in order to establish its empirical relevance as a crisis initiator. The common



narrative that Pakistan enjoying a near nuclear parity vis-à-vis India, normatively exploits this advantage and uses it to foster instability through sub-conventional means will be tested against the crisis events. Explanatory framework will be employed with multiple narrative synthesis model to exhibit the similarities and differences of the results and draw pertinent conclusions regarding the possible reasons for recurrent crisis and low threshold conflict between India and Pakistan.

The Mumbai Crisis – 2008

On November 26, 2008, insurgents linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) breached the security of Mumbai, India's commercial capital. They carried a substantial cache of modern weapons and explosive devices, including GPS, automatic rifles, hand grenades, IEDs, and communication gadgets (Coll, 2019). The insurgents attacked multiple locations, killing around 140 locals and 25 foreign tourists, including US and UK passport-holders, in luxury hotels and other sites. The main railway station was the worst affected with the largest number of deaths (Magnier, 2008). The crisis lasted over two days, exposing the strategic paralysis of India's law enforcement. In the aftermath, Indian media and officials implicated Pakistan's ISI, alleging the attackers had departed from Karachi by boat and landed in Mumbai undetected. The Mumbai attacks in 2008 demonstrated the vulnerabilities in India's security apparatus and highlighted the challenges of urban terrorism. The incident paralyzed Indian law enforcement and exposed significant security lapses in a highly sensitive area (CNN, 2020). The immediate narrative constructed by India, blaming Pakistan's ISI, aimed to deflect internal criticism and focus international attention on Pakistan. Despite the gravity of the attacks, India refrained from escalating the situation militarily, influenced by the nuclear deterrence dynamic. This restraint underscored the complex interplay between conventional military responses and the overarching threat of nuclear escalation in South Asia. The event was played out in media galleries akin to US Saga of “9/11,” Indians also tend to recall the Mumbai terrorist attacks as its “26/11.” (Vaidya, 2017)

- In post Mumbai insurgent attack scenario, there were serious apprehensions that fragile deterrence stability between India – Pakistan will be seriously strained and will not bode well for the strategic future of the region. Incidentally general elections in India were just knocking at the doors of the republic. It was feared that Singh’s parting government will be enticed to settle for a hostile and aggressive stance for facing saving against their staunch political rivals in India. A part of establishment and security conclave in New Delhi pushed for limited strikes against LeT and JuD centers in main land Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. In this heat of already tense scenario a hoax call reported in Islamabad added further fuel to fire, and serious threat lurched for initiation of conflict between India – Pakistan, thus posing a dire constrain on deterrence stability equation of the region. Congress led government in India however, could not militarily escalate possibly due to the fear of Pakistan’s retribution and conflict spiral stakes. Alternatively, intense diplomatic pressure was brought to bear on Pakistan through Washington, Beijing and Riyadh. Islamabad’s asymmetric escalation stance intimidated the Indian leadership intimidated Indian leaders and curtailed kinetic options to retaliate. “Unpredictability on the Pakistan side and the fear that its decision makers could opt for a disproportionate response, including the nuclear option, stymied any possible chance of



military action”. (Indian Express, n.d.) The later accounts revealed that Indian foreign and security conclave took solace by perceiving that it was their guarantees of restraint that opened the vistas for US government and other world leaders to persuade Pakistan to conduct sporadic raids against LeT centers resulting in arrest of its key members allegedly having connections to the Mumbai insurgent attacks. In July 2009 Pakistan publicized investigations revealing latter’s involvement in the infamous siege (Menon, n.d., pp. 66–67).

Pathankot – Uri Crisis 2016

The dawn of year 2015 saw a gradual surge in actions of Kashmiri freedom fighters against Indian Army deployed in the valley. In the upsurge of these incidents the Pathankot – Uri Crises was tipped of as a consequence to major insurgent incidents targeting Indian forces in Pathankot- Air Force Base (January 2016) and Uri- Army brigade headquarters (September 2016) respectively (Tribune, 2016). The Uri attack, coinciding with a relief operation between two Indian infantry battalions when the guards were low, exposed severe security lapses. India accused Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) of involvement, and tensions escalated along the LoC (BBC News, 2016). Following the Uri attack, the Indian government claimed to have conducted surgical strikes on militant launch pads in Azad Kashmir. These claims were widely publicized but remained unverified, with Pakistan denying any cross-LoC raids and allowing international media to inspect the alleged sites. The Pathankot and Uri attacks in 2016 marked a significant escalation in insurgent activities against Indian forces in Kashmir. The Uri attack, in particular, exposed critical security lapses and prompted India to assertively respond by claiming surgical strikes against militant launch pads in Azad Kashmir. However, the veracity of these claims was widely disputed, and Pakistan's denial, coupled with the lack of tangible evidence, undermined India's narrative. The investigation also revealed serious lack of coordination among adjoining sentry posts. In the proceeding days India’s DGMO while interacting with media contended that they had evidence regarding involvement of JeM in the attack. Concern was also registered by India via hotline conversation between two DGMOs and recovery of miscellaneous combat items and weapons with Pakistani marking was indicated. However, no further corroborated evidence was produced that could tangibly prove that Pakistan had anything to do with this indigenous act of Kashmiri freedom fighters in Uri (The Indian Express, 2016).

The Uri attack was again a sort of catch-22 situation for BJP led government, since the latter had won the conservative Hindu majority constituency in India on tall claims of taking bold and tough stance against Pakistan. Indian Premier Narendra Modi and his associates directed the armed forces for a stern action against perpetrators of the attack (Joshi, 2017). The core question is whether the general or immediate deterrence failed or it succeeded in Pathankot/ Uri Crisis? Although there are no clear answers to validate the functionality of deterrence in crisis where one side claims the use of force, while the other dyad is dismissive such claims. Nonetheless, since Indian strategic capability failed to stop the occurrence of insurgent attacks in Pathankot and Uri, hence these occurrences exhibit the failure of India nuclear deterrence at sub-conventional tier. The combination of frustration creeping in the Indian security establishment by repeated failures



of Indian strategic deterrence and commitment trap that was laid by belligerent BJP in its pre- and post-election stance to deal with any future act of provocation brought the incumbent Indian government of the time in a blind ally of retaliation to reflect the re-establishment of immediate deterrence; mainly for the consumption of local and international audience. However, Pathankot/ Uri Crisis-2016 and proclaimed surgical strikes that apparently were win-win situation for all was prospectively an extremely precarious path for any future crisis. The much-trumpeted claims of surgical strikes and Pakistan's outright denial of any such occurrence induced upon the India to up the ante by committing troops across the border in added disparaging retaliatory strikes with tangible proofs to prove the mettle of Indian deterrence. It can then safely be said that what happened in February 2019 had its seeds already sown in Pathankot/ Uri Crisis and proclaimed Surgical Strikes – 2016. As Van Jackson describes it as:

“Use of force for the sake of deterrence creates [a] commitment traps.” (Jackson, 2018)

Pulwama Crisis 2019

The Pulwama – India/Pakistan Standoff 2019, has further highlighted the complex deterrence relationship prevalent between India and Pakistan. The series of events of this tense standoff in 2019, vividly validate the potentially volatile nature of strategic stability equation and for some analysts it also corroborates the ubiquity of stability/instability paradox in the region (Khan & Khan, 2020, pp. 251–267). If this crisis if on one hand reaffirmed the efficacy of Pakistan's general deterrence posture vis-à-vis India was established, on the other hand it also unsheathed India's waning strategic patience and a novel tendency to plunge into provocative retaliatory mode. The crisis began in February 2019, after a devastating suicidal attack by young Kashmiri lad Adil Ahmad Dar linked to JeM. The attack resulted in death of forty Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldiers who were on-board in a bus, heading to Pulwama in Occupied Indian Kashmir Valley when an explosive laden vehicle struck them ("Kashmir Attack," 2019). In response, on February 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted airstrikes on an alleged JeM training camp in Balakot, Pakistan (Siyech, 2019, pp. 6–10). Pakistani air defenses scrambled jets, causing Indian planes to drop their payloads hastily, missing their targets. On February 27, 2019, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) retaliated with "Operation Swift Retort," striking six locations along the LoC and shooting down two Indian aircraft. The captured Indian pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan, was later returned to India ("Abhinandan: Captured Indian Pilot," 2019). The crisis highlighted the tensions and risks of escalation between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. The Pulwama attack in 2019 and the subsequent Indian airstrikes on Balakot represented a significant escalation in India-Pakistan tensions. The airstrikes marked a departure from previous restraint, showcasing India's willingness to engage in cross-border operations. Pakistan's swift retaliation with "Operation Swift Retort" highlighted the risks of rapid escalation and underscored the effectiveness of its deterrence posture. The crisis revealed the complexities of managing conventional military operations within a nuclear-armed context, emphasizing the need for careful crisis management and the potential for miscalculation to spiral into broader conflict (Dogra, 2019). The involvement of the US as a mediator underscored the international dimensions of the crisis and the ongoing strategic competition in the region ("US Calls Upon Pakistan," 2019). The commitment trap from previous



incidents, such as the Pathankot-Uri crisis, further enticed India into taking bold actions in Pulwama, highlighting a dangerous trend and questioning the stability of nuclear deterrence in the region.

The Pulwama Crisis – 2019 has quite a uniqueness vis-à-vis the previous crises since there are serious chances of recurrence of such an incident by brutalised young Kashmiri boy on a given day. And the way Modi has overnight snatched the ownership of local Kashmiris after August 5, 2019 and the imposed suffocating curfew on local populace the risks of another such stand exacerbated. Ironically the hawks like Manpreet Sethi a prominent Indian security expert rather than reflecting on the domestic variables like Indian armed forces brutalities and illegal actions of Indian government that are instrumental to the commencement of such crises are boosting Modi's callous behaviour i.e. unbecoming of leader of nuclear state by writing that *"Balakot exposed the limits of a nuclear brinkmanship strategy. Not only did India demonstrate there was room for conventional response, it also rather uncharacteristically, did not shy away from manipulating the risk of war"* (Sethi, 2019, p. 8). The upping of ante by IAF to target mainland Pakistan has not yielded results in deterrence domain as Pakistan's one notch-up military response on February 27, 2019 demonstrated. The Pulwama crisis also quenched the much-touted anxiety spread around Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) with an objective to undermine Pakistan's TNWs, especially NASR as a battlefield ballistic missile. The lopsided postulations were built that mainly espoused anticipations and myths spread by few analysts that any conventional attack on Pakistani soil will be right away responded with the NASR. Such faulty assumptions not only led to misperceptions implicating Pakistan's lowered nuclear threshold, but also amounted to bring under question the operational efficiency of its otherwise potent conventional forces and their inherent deterrence. The whole idea seemed to discredit Pakistan's Full-Spectrum-Deterrence (FSD) with a slender scholastic approach by a select group of scholars. Hence, for Pakistanis it was a real test for showcasing the breadth of its conventional response prowess against the India's much flaunted limited war strategy. It was a potent fusion of PAF operational efficiency that made its mark on 27 February 2019 and also the range of Pakistan's ballistic and cruise missiles that re-established the dented immediate deterrence and intimidated Mr. Modi to not escalate any further following the events of 27 February 2019. The Pulwama Crisis also answered the question of equating Pakistan's nuclear capability as bluff (as dubbed few Indian scholars), especially so in the light of fact that IAF's ineptitude and intimidation for any large-scale retaliation against Pakistan after PAF's counter-strikes resulting in the loss of two Indian aircrafts. In this backdrop it may be recalled that during the entire crisis Pakistan's nuclear threshold was nowhere thought to have been breached. Contrarily, after 27 February 2019, frenzied Modi hurriedly injected nuclear connotations in mid of the crisis by forward posturing of INS Arihant and frantic nuclear threat peddling for using dual technology BrahMos cruise missiles (Sharma & Sanyal, 2019). A formal Indian Navy's spokesman statement quoted below corroborates the psychosis that induced in civilian and military leadership alike. Moreover, these frenzied reactions have a strategic design as contours of emerging Indian pre-emptive counter force strategy in combination with already



stipulated threat of massive retaliation suggests a palpable contemplation by the Indian security enclave towards implied NFU in any prospective crisis.

"The major combat units of the Indian Navy including the Carrier Battle Group with INS Vikramaditya, nuclear submarines and scores of other ships, submarines and aircraft swiftly transited from exercise to operational deployment mode as tensions between India and Pakistan escalated," (India Times, 2019)

Thus, the Pulwama crisis of 2019 illustrated India's increasing assertiveness, with its airstrikes on Balakot signaling a departure from past restraint. Both nations however, managed the narrative to avoid uncontrolled escalation, with India framing its actions as defensive and Pakistan emphasizing restraint after downing an Indian fighter jet.

Recurrent strategic crisis and stability/instability paradox

The stability / instability is a broad concept that encompasses wide range of operations below the strategic threshold in the context of nuclear deterrence. The operations both in the realms of conventional and sub-conventional domains are accounted for under this rubric. In its broadest sense the actions and counter actions by India and Pakistan during these crises can be tailor fitted in this concept. In Mumbai Crisis – 2008 the actions of insurgent group to target an Indian metropolitan fit in the frame of stability / instability paradox, provided the connivance of Pakistan is established. India's reaction to this sub-conventional action was mainly in diplomatic domain trying to isolate and pressurize Pakistan through international community. India did not venture in strategic domain against Pakistan in the aftermath of Mumbai terrorist attacks despite the presence of CSD. This restraint leading to crisis stability is attributed to the efficacy of nuclear deterrence. In case of Pathankot / Uri crisis the attack on Indian army's brigade headquarters cannot be neatly fitted in stability / instability paradox theoretical framework. No corroborative evidence is available to link the role of Pakistan in this incident. The action by the insurgents had an adequate degree of autonomy in itself. The reaction by Indian forces in shape of surgical strikes is also empirically weak to be counted in this paradox's conceptual framework because of its contested status by Pakistan (Press Trust of India, 2016). The measurable intent by the actors controlling the nuclear weapons in dyadic relationship to exploit the space below the nuclear threshold is a critical variable to test the hypothesis of stability/instability paradigm. In India – Pakistan context, mostly the low threshold crises have been triggered in grey zone of sub-conventional warfare and no empirical linkage can squarely be established between the occurrence of these crises and the deliberate intent of state actors. In this backdrop attributing the crises to a broad stability / instability paradox will always remain a subjective matter and judgment call of the analysts.

The Pulwama crisis was again triggered by the action of a local resident of Indian Occupied Kashmir who had personal reasons to perpetrate this act (BBC News, 2019). No linkage convincingly can be established between the suicidal attack and Pakistan's active hand in it. Fitting this sabotage act by a lone wolf in the stability / instability paradox may be an academic overestimation. The events of February 26 / 27, 2019 however are the most relevant part of the



case study to validate the concept of stability/instability paradox. The actions and counteractions by India and Pakistan can tangibly be measured as their veracity was by and large mutually accepted. The ensuing actions by India and Pakistan were carefully calibrated to remain below the red lines. The element of aggression was intended to be inclined towards lower end of intensity spectrum predominantly due to the enormity of stakes involved as a result of deterrence failure. These events have a predominant footprint of functional deterrence between this nuclear dyad. The sub-optimal offensive actions by the two states can be fitted in stability / instability paradox theoretical frame, albeit with its broadest – zoomed out lens.

The Pulwama attack in 2019 and the subsequent Indian airstrikes on Balakot represented a significant escalation in India-Pakistan tensions. The airstrikes marked a departure from previous restraint, showcasing India's willingness to engage in cross-border operations. Pakistan's swift retaliation with "Operation Swift Retort" highlighted the risks of rapid escalation and underscored the effectiveness of its deterrence posture. The crisis revealed the complexities of managing conventional military operations within a nuclear-armed context, emphasizing the need for careful crisis management and the potential for miscalculation to spiral into broader conflict. The involvement of the US as a mediator underscored the international dimensions of the crisis and the ongoing strategic competition in the region. The commitment trap from previous incidents, such as the Pathankot-Uri crisis, further enticed India into taking bold actions in Pulwama, highlighting a dangerous trend and questioning the stability of nuclear deterrence in the region.

Conclusion

Since the Kargil conflict in June 1999, there has been a noticeable trend towards increasing complexity and dynamism in the deterrence strategies between India and Pakistan, culminating with the Pulwama crisis in 2019. Each subsequent crisis between these two nuclear-armed states has not only escalated tensions but also introduced new elements of deterrence instability. For instance, the Kargil War highlighted the limits of conventional military engagements under nuclear overhang, while the 2008 Mumbai attacks showcased the complications introduced by non-state actors in the nuclear deterrence equation. Further, the 2016 Uri attack and the subsequently claimed surgical strikes by India demonstrated an evolution in the military responses under the nuclear threshold. The Pulwama attack in February 2019 and India's retaliatory airstrike in Balakot brought forth the role of cross-border aerial engagements and their implications for nuclear deterrence. India's strategic thought process is lately being driven as a dissatisfied - a revisionist actor with aspirations to be a regional hegemon. This incentivizes India to pursue an autarchic policy of regional hegemony and military capability aggrandizement; exacerbating regional security dilemma alongside crisis and arms race instability in South Asia. Pakistan on the contrary seeks sovereign equality and peaceful co-existence as its inalienable rights. The nuclear deterrence in India – Pakistan context where a legacy of distrust and conflicts persists is often seen with a lens of maximalist objective. This entails an ideal condition of absolute peace, whereas recurrent strategic crises like Mumbai Crisis – 2008, Pathankot / Uri Crisis - 2016 and Pulwama Crisis - 2019 which are low threshold conflicts are usually dubbed as deterrence abnormalities. The



deterrence on the contrary is merely one function of nuclearization, which effectively induces a condition of strategic stalemate between the two arch rivals. The resolution of enduring disputes warrants a comprehensive approach that focuses on structural issues lying at the very roots of the enduring acrimony.

In first and second nuclear age it may be postulated that there is a minimum cost threshold below which the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence will always be questionable. The simmering crisis in dyadic relationship is more attributable to failure of diplomacy, intransigence towards resolution of enduring disputes and differing perceptions vis-à-vis each other’s intent, resolve and capabilities. The antagonist pair of nuclear dyads perceptively has lived and will continue to live in two differing rather opposing realities. Indian strategic enclave has always lived with a self-founded myth of radical Islamist takeover in Pakistan with effective backing of its military and this fear has persistently guided its strategic thought on nuclear issues vis-à-vis later. And for Pakistan, the Indian state has perceptibly been commandeered by the Hindutva elite with Modi entrenched in hot seat as Indian Premier. The callous conduct of the later in post Uri and Post Pulwama incidents by resorting to naked nuclear brinkmanship are points in the case. The perception mismatch coupled with instable strategic environment shaped by the use of Fifth Generation Warfare, technological advancements in weaponry presents an omnipresent threat to strategic stability in South Asia.

India also needs to extricate itself out of the misnomer of concept of ‘strategic chain’ and its quagmire: it is a potential recipe for an arms race and crisis instability which in turn can affect the deterrence stability. Realization has to sink in that India – Pakistan case offers a neat one to one nuclear deterrence equation and has to be preferably viewed from this conceptual lens. The episode of Balakot Strikes- 2019 and Pakistan’s counter-strikes amply magnifies this direct deterrence linkage, wherein India’s illusion was shattered when its intent to conventionally escalate the conflict below Pakistan’s nuclear threshold was instinctively countered by quid-pro-quo plus response by the latter. A better appreciation of the impact of nuclear deterrence on bilateral crises will facilitate a pragmatic cost - benefit analysis of competing strategies and a discursive way forward. A two staged strategy that entails conflict stabilization followed by conflict resolution can lead to stability and peace in the region. Similarly, combination of two factors that is visionary leadership and apt diplomatic environment are also an essential for peace in the region. The increased frequency and severity of crises, combined with technological advancements and the reluctance to engage in arms control measures, create a highly unstable strategic environment. Although both India and Pakistan have shown extraordinary restraint in avoiding large-scale conflicts, the evolving nature of their rivalry—characterized by crisis mismanagement, incompatible theories of deterrence, and the diminishing role of third parties—suggests that the region’s future trajectory is fraught with risks. Addressing these challenges requires not only bilateral efforts but also a rethinking of the role of external actors and the modernization strategies that have thus far only intensified the security dilemma between these two nuclear-armed states.



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