

Deterrence & Cooperation: Nuclear Weapons and Regional Cooperation in South Asia

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Abstract

The paper looks at the Nuclearization of south Asia and its effects on regional cooperation. It assesses the continuous building of nuclear forces and its diversification by India and Pakistan and tries to evaluate its effects on their cooperation on regional issues of vital importance.

This paper also tries to critically evaluate the literature on existential deterrence and argue that it is unable to explain the absence of major wars in South Asia. Pakistan has been able to enjoy the benefits of nuclear deterrence while at the same time wages a low intensity conflict against India. However, Indian possession of nuclear weapons has not deterred Pakistan's sub-conventional warfare against India. The paper tries to look into these unequal effects of nuclear deterrence by arguing that the degree of deterrence is dependent on the nuclear posture adopted by a state and is not automatically guaranteed by the mere possession of nuclear weapons.

The paper concludes by looking at the ways and means of enhancing the nuclear stability and regional cooperation in South Asia by involving other influential actors like China and America in a comprehensive security dialogue. That alone can ensure a de-escalation of the ensuing nuclear arms race in South Asia.

Keywords: *Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Posture, Deterrence, South Asia, Optimisation Theory*

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Introduction

The debate on nuclear proliferation and deterrence is as old as the advent of nuclear weapons. The United States, being the leading nuclear state perceived the possession of nuclear weapons by other states as a threat to its national security and supremacy and wanted to maintain a monopoly over it. Soviet Union too acquired nuclear weapons in 1949 followed by Britain, France and China. The lack of a great power war and the ensuing stability during cold war is largely attributed to acquisition of nuclear weapons by both the United States and the Soviet Union. Direct wars were not considered as an option between the nuclear states because the cost of a war was greater than its benefits.

In academia, the serious debate on the utility of nuclear weapons and structural reasons for their proliferation started in the early 1980s. The most famous debate between Kenneth Waltz and Scott D. Sagan too revolves around the question of whether acquisition of nuclear weapons by more states leads to stability. Kenneth Waltz argues that acquisition of nuclear weapons creates a sense of absolute deterrence that leads to stability which conventional deterrence is unable to do. On the other hand Scott Sagan favoured the abolition of nuclear weapons which according to him accelerates the problem of proliferation and threats of nuclear-armed terrorists that may lead to an extremely dangerous world. Kenneth Waltz argues against the monopoly on nuclear weapons by certain states like Israel in West Asia create instability and can only be mitigated by Iran and other regional powers acquiring their own deterrence vehicles¹.

There is a good amount of literature on nuclear policy adopted by great powers keeping in view the huge impact nukes reinforce during cold war period (Mearshiemer 1985; Freedman 1986, 2003). The literature available helped in theorising the nuclear experiences of great powers during cold war period versus the nuclear arsenals possessed by other powers. This was made through the conceptual categories offered by this huge canvass of literature. However, this view is challenged by Vipin Narang² who argues that Superpower cold war experiences are inadequate to explain the nuclear strategies adopted by regional powers like India and Pakistan. This is because an “overwhelming majority of the modern nuclear weapon states are regional powers with limited resources and specific security interests often confined to their respective regions. Indeed, out of the existing nine nuclear weapon states, only two can be categorised as having a global nuclear weapon

1 Waltz, Kenneth. (2012, July/August). Why Iran Should Get the Bomb, Foreign Affairs.

2 Narang, Vipin. (2014). Nuclear Strategy in Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

capacity with the remaining seven being regional nuclear powers”.³ Narang asserts that the experiences of superpowers cannot be implemented on regional powers because regional nuclear powers face different systemic and domestic constraints than super powers.

There is a voluminous literature on the deterrence discourse in South Asia contributed by all schools of deterrent optimists and pessimists. The deterrence theorists have mostly debated whether the presence of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent have resulted in strategic stability. In this paper I will try to explain, using the theoretical framework offered by Posture Optimization Theory, that fear of nuclear war and ultimate annihilation has deterred India and Pakistan from fighting major wars. Nuclear deterrence has ensured strategic stability and is more stable than conventional balance of power as empirical evidence shows that South Asian region is spared from major wars despite recurrent crisis. Former Indian army chief K Sundarji predicted:

*A mutual minimum nuclear deterrent will act as a stabilizing factor. Pakistan will see it as a counteracting India's superior conventional power potential and providing a more level playing field. The chances of conventional war between the two will be less likely than before.*⁴

The Imbalance of Power between India and Pakistan

States in south Asia are disproportionately weaker than India, the strongest country in the region. India is vastly enormous in size and has a huge power potential than all the South Asian states combined⁵ and “this immense disproportion in the size, population, and economic and military potential of India with the other member countries creates wariness among these states about India’s potential hegemonic dominance in the region”.⁶

In south Asian region, India shares borders with all neighbouring countries excluding Maldives and the remaining states in South Asia are not geographically contiguous to each

3 The nuclear arsenal of former USSR was inherited by Russia maintaining its superpower status and projecting its capabilities beyond neighborhood. China, on the other hand restricted its power and capabilities to its immediate neighborhood.

4 Cheema, Zafar Iqbal. (2010). *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development and Implications for South Asian Security*. Islamabad: Oxford University Press.

5 India has the largest area among South Asia states accounting almost 72 per cent (which approximately is four times bigger size than that of Pakistan, which is the second largest state in the region); India also has good share in population accounting 77 per cent of the South Asian region’s population; and India produces huge exports accounting to 76 per cent of the total exports in the region.

6 For an elaborate discussion on this point, see Jetly, Rajshree. (2003). *Conflict Management Strategies in ASEAN: Perspectives for SAARC*, *The Pacific Review*, 16(1), 53-76.

other (except Afghanistan-Pakistan) and this geographic contiguity buttresses the indo-centric nature of the region. Due to this geographical centrality of India, it appears to be a constant factor in all the major problems in the region. This creates a unique paradoxical situation where a threat emanates from a state which is a core regional power.

Pakistan thinks that India perceives it as an obstacle to Indian regional hegemony and is increasing conventional and nuclear capability to eliminate this impediment. This perception of India as a hegemon is a threat to identity and survival of Pakistan which always define its identity as “not India”. India and Pakistan fought three wars (1947-8, 1965, and 1999) over the disputed states of Jammu and Kashmir. The disagreement over Kashmir is of important significance because it encompasses the *raison d’être* of two countries.⁷ Pakistan conceives its identity as incomplete state devoid of strategic depth without the accession of Kashmir within its territorial limits (a Muslim majority state). While as, India wants to hold on to Kashmir as a symbol and assertion of its secular ideology.

The India-Pakistan conflict is the direct consequence of the imbalance of power between the two states. The persistence of the conflict is the consequence of the persistence of this imbalance and Pakistan attempts to correct this imbalance by internally increasing its military and economic capabilities and externally forging alliances with major powers. India is stronger militarily and economically and its economy is more than six times as large as Pakistan’s. It is also much broadly industrialized, and its defense military base is largest in the developing world.⁸ Pakistan’s industrial strength and its defense industry is heavily dwarfed by India. At partition, the British India military was divided on a 2:1 basis between India and Pakistan and this ratio has not changed much in last five decades. Pakistan to correct this imbalance has formed alliances with China and U.S.A, and increased its defense expenditure to balance India, which is being described as “defense-oriented economy” rather than “development-oriented economy” by various scholars. Pakistan spent around 4% of its Gross National Product (GNP) on defense during 1950’s, by late 1960’s it was increased to 6% of GNP and by 1975 Pakistan spent 6.28% of GNP on defence. Despite such imbalances in military capability and disparity in geography, Pakistan has tried to balance India by forging alliances, increased its military capability and has acquired a strong nuclear capability which has established a sense of deterrence at the strategic level between the two countries, thereby weakening the strong security dilemma faced by

7 Ganguly, Sumit. (2008). Nuclear Stability in South Asia, *International Security*, 33(2), 45-70.

8 Rajagopalan, Rajesh. (2005). Neorealist Theory and the India-Pakistan Conflict in Kanti Bajpai and Siddharth Mallavarapu (eds.) *International Relations in India: Theorizing the Region and Nation*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Pakistan's policy makers⁹.

Security Dilemma and the Ensuing Arms Race

The independence of India and Pakistan based on antagonistic ideology and identity resulted in perennial divergences. These asymmetries in their military and economic power, territorial disparity and unresolved territorial disputes resulted in intractable conflicts. These disputes, where each state perceives its interests in zero-sum games, security enhancement by way of forging alliances with powerful states, increasing military capability and acquisition of nuclear weapons becomes a necessary condition for survivability and security of a state. In such an environment where security dilemma prevails enhancement and modernization of military in one state creates a sense of security threat in another which leads to arms race.

The Chinese military threat which made India to enhance its conventional and nuclear capabilities after its defeat in 1962 war resulted in exacerbation of Pakistan's security dilemma. To balance its conventional military superiority and contain India from becoming a regional hegemon, Pakistan forged alliances with USA and China. Further, the humiliating defeat of Pakistan in 1971 war was a terrible blow to its pride and Pakistan considered acquisition of nuclear weapons as a necessary step to offset India's conventional superiority. Pakistan's nuclear weaponization, since its inception, has been undisputedly India-centric.¹⁰ To ensure its survival against conventional military superiority of India buttressed by a highly threatening cold start doctrine, Pakistan developed tactical nuclear weapons, like Nasr to counterweight India's proactive strategy.¹¹

China has helped Islamabad to build its nuclear and missile capabilities to prevent India from becoming a major power which is possible through deliberate propping up of regimes surrounding India, especially Pakistan.¹² John Graver argues that China wants to

9 Pakistan's nuclear programme is overtly India-centric and its core aim is to deter an Indian attack that might reduce Pakistan's size even further' and threaten its very survival as a state. Pakistan's leadership was wholeheartedly ready to embrace the nuclear technology even if they would have to 'eat grass' to achieve it, there were serious economic and technological hindrances. See, Mehdi, Jalil. (2017). Nuclear Strategy and Regional Stability in Southern Asia, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 4(1), 123-137

10 For a comprehensive account of Pakistan's nuclear acquisition, see Khan, Feroz Hassan. (2012). *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

11 Ahmad, Mansoor. (2016, June 30). Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and their Impact on Stability, *Regional Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

12 Paul, T.V. (2005). *The Cause and Consequences of China- Pakistan Nuclear/Missile Collaboration in* Lowell Dittmer (ed.), *South Asia's Nuclear Security Dilemma: India, Pakistan, and China*. New Delhi:

keep Pakistan independent, powerful and confident in order to present India with a standing two- front threat.¹³ This encourages New Delhi to forge a balance of coalition with the other states that see China as a threat including Japan and the United States of America.

Nuclearisation of South Asia

India started its nuclear programme immediately after its independence under the charismatic leadership of Homi Bhabha to meet its chronic civilian needs of power and electricity. The nuclear programme was started with peaceful civilian intentions but it later started nuclear weapons programme after China tested its nuclear device at Lop Nur in 1964.¹⁴

Pakistan too wanted to develop nuclear capability which became explicit when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then foreign minister made a famous statement, "if India builds the bomb, we will eat grass to get one of our own." Further, the 1971 war and creation of Bangladesh precipitated the launch of Pakistan's nuclear programme. Pakistan was a de facto nuclear power by the late 1980s but was unwilling to introduce nuclear weapons in south Asia due to the probability of a colossal international reaction and sanctions by the Non-proliferation regime. In May 1998, when India conducted five nuclear tests in Rajasthan, Pakistan, using the political cover of Indian tests, responded with six tests in the same month.

Nuclearisation of South Asia resulted in condemnatory reactions from Global community and proliferation of literature on consequences of nuclear weapons. Deterrence theorists argue that overt presence of nuclear weapons has contributed to strategic stability by reducing the capability of a full scale war. Proliferation pessimists argue that Nuclearisation leads to escalation or full scale war. Nuclear deterrence is robust in South Asia, as the outcomes of 1999 and 2001-02 crisis show and acquisition of nuclear weapons has led to limited wars, preventing escalation to a full blown conventional war. In Kargil war of 1999, India confined the conflict to Kargil region and Sumit Ganguly asserts that source of Indian restraint was actually the overt possession of a nuclear arsenal by Pakistan. Further, the terrorist attack on 13 December 2001 which had its roots in Pakistan was sufficient for India to retaliate militarily against Pakistan. What explains India's unwillingness to resort to military action against Pakistan is its possession of a limited nuclear arsenal, which acted

Routledge.

13 Cited in Paul (2005) p.181

14 Khan, Saira. (2009). Nuclear Weapons and Conflict Transformation: The Case of India-Pakistan. New York: Routledge.

as a deterrent to Indian action. As K. Subrahmanyam, a prominent Indian defence analyst and political commentator wrote in 1993:

*The awareness on both sides of a nuclear capability that can enable either country to assemble nuclear weapons at short notice induces mutual caution. This caution is already evident on the part of India. In 1965, when Pakistan carried out its "Operation Gibraltar" and sent in infiltrators, India sent its army across ceasefire line to destroy the assembly points of the infiltrators. That escalated into a full scale war. In 1990, when Pakistan once again carried out a massive infiltration of terrorists trained in Pakistan, India tried to deal with the problem on Indian territory and did not send its army in Pakistan occupied Kashmir.*¹⁵

But this gives rise to a more important question. Why has the possession of nuclear weapons by Pakistan induced caution in India while Pakistan is continuing its policy of a low intensity war against India unabated? The evidence suggests that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons has deterred India whereas India's possession of Nuclear weapons has not deterred Pakistan. To understand the dynamics of deterrence and its differential effect, Vipin Narang presents a detailed theoretical account about the regional nuclear deterrence in his theory called as posture optimization theory or simply optimization theory. Optimization theory is "based on four sequenced and identifiable variables that include both the structural and domestic factors. States optimise their posture based on a series of sequential variables 'that are prioritized – from the structural to unit level-to produce a specific posture'".¹⁶ Narang argues that mere acquisition of nuclear weapons is not significant factor to determine deterrence but it is nuclear posture that is more important. He defines posture as the capabilities (actual nuclear forces), command and control procedures (how they are managed, deployed and potentially released) and employment doctrine (conditions under which to use).

Narang thematically categorises three nuclear postures namely assured retaliation, catalytic and asymmetric escalation posture. He argues that a state changes its posture according to its security environment and civil-military relationship. He argues that the selection of a specific posture have "an important effect on nature of the threats faced by a state because some nuclear postures deter conflict better than others".¹⁷

15 Cited in Sumit Ganguly(Fall, 2008), pp. 45-70

16 Narang (2014) p.27

17 Ibid, p.300

State's security environment (presence of a powerful proximate threat or a reliable ally) is the primary determinant of its nuclear posture. If a state's security environment does not determine a specific posture, domestic variables determine the choice of a specific Posture. These domestic variables are effectively based upon what a state can organizationally manage (civil-military relations) and resources at its disposal (resource constraints). This works as a 'rationalist decision tree' where a state optimizes its posture by rationally analyzing these variables sequentially. Asymmetric escalation posture adopted by Pakistan can be explained in relation to its unbalanced security environment. It is foremost designed to counter security threats from militarily superior India by adopting the first use of nuclear weapons in the conflict.

The adoption of catalytic posture by Pakistan is well predicted by optimisation theory because of the fact that it had a dependent third party ally in the name of United States. This is evident in Brasstacks crisis in 1987 when Pakistan used "this Posture against India which forced a US intervention to diffuse the crisis. Since US policy in South Asia was badly in need of Pakistan's unwavering support, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it cannot afford an Indian assault on Pakistan. However, after the loss of US interest in Afghanistan in a post cold war South Asia, Pakistan was severely vulnerable".¹⁸

Narang asserts that the adoption of asymmetric escalation posture by Pakistan was to deter India effectively. This posture ensured Pakistan to pursue a strategy of limited conflict against Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir. The director general for South Asia in Pakistan's Ministry of foreign affairs, Jalil Jilani, explained,

*Since Pakistan's acquisition of [an overt] nuclear capacity, Pakistan has felt much less threatened by Indian conventional capabilities, and thus more confident vis-a- vis India. This increased confidence has enabled the Pakistani's to adopt policies that put a check on Indian ambition in South Asia. At Kargil, Pakistan was able to block the supply of [Indian] troops in Kashmir and their [were] limits as to what India could do in response.*¹⁹

Pakistan's actions in Kashmir provided India with the compelling evidence of feasibility of limited wars in a nuclear South Asia. Former Indian army chief of staff V.P

18 Mehdi, Jalil. (2017). Nuclear Strategy and Regional Stability in Southern Asia. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 4(1), 123-137.

19 Cited in Kapur, S. Paul. (2005). India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe. *International Security*, 30(2), 127-152

Malik explains,

*Kargil showed the way. If Pakistan could do Kargil [without escalation to the strategic level], India could do something similar, in response to continued Pakistani provocations in Kashmir without fear of nuclear confrontation. Thus, in the wake of the Kargil war, there was an increasing realization in India that stability exists in strategic balance.*²⁰

India's response to 2001-02 terrorist attack on Parliament can be seen in this light where India mobilized roughly 500,000 troops along LOC and the International border. However, India could not launch an offensive across the International border due to the threat of Pakistan's use of nuclear weapons against the Indian troops.

Narang argues that India adopted assured retaliation posture because it is buffered against China's conventional military capability by inhospitable terrain. Further, the nuclear posture of India makes crisis more stable as adversaries do not have to fear that India will initiate nuclear use. Ambiguity is considered to enhance deterrence and India introduced such ambiguity in its 2003 doctrine by stating that it reserved the right to respond the chemical or biological weapons use with retaliation.

Nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan helped in maintaining stability, by creating strategic balance and power parity in Pakistan which always considered India's conventional superiority as an 'existential threat to its survival'. The development of 60-kilometer (37 mile) Hatf-IX or Nasr ballistic missile in response to India's limited war strategy is a means of reinforcing deterrence and enhancing stability at higher levels of conflict.

The Problem of Chinese Interference

The 1962 war with China had many consequences for India-Pakistan relations. It massively increased India's defence spending and resulted in significant changes in military balance in south Asia. Pakistan related India's defeat with China to India's military weakness and tried to capitalize this situation by achieving a more favorable settlement of the Kashmir dispute. This was evident in 1965 when Rann of Kutch incident was not settled decisively in India's favour. This emboldened Pakistan, leading to infiltration of troops across the border in hopes of arising a popular revolt.²¹ China exploded its nuclear device in 1964 which increased security dilemma of India. India did not want to repeat the

20 Ibid.p.148

21 Lowell, Dittmer (2005) p.114.

1962 episode and hence started building its military and defense capabilities and building nuclear deterrent. The humiliating defeat of Pakistan in 1971 war provided a huge impetus for Pakistan's nuclear programme.

China is both a cause and a contributor to nuclear and missile proliferation in the region of South Asia. Its nuclear and missile capabilities are seen as a threat to India, which launched its own comprehensive missile development programme in 1983 formally known as Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP). India's security dilemma has also been exacerbated by Chinese nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan. China's motivations in transferring nuclear materials and technology derive from considerations of regional balance of power and containment of India. India's emergence as a competitor would upset China's predominant position in the region, Hence, conflicts with Pakistan will accelerate arms race and will keep India bracketed with its smaller regional rival Pakistan and give ample strategic space to China.²²

According to Robert Ross, China continues its support for Pakistan by supplying nuclear and missile technology as "China views a credible Pakistani deterrent as the most effective way to guarantee the security of its sole ally in Southern Asia against Indian power." The precise nature of Sino-Pakistani nuclear cooperation is not fully known, but U.S intelligence sources have contended that Pakistani nuclear bomb project would not have come into being without active support of China.²³ Pakistan couldn't have developed a successful nuclear weaponization program without the backing of China. Their assistance was crucial for supplying "the CHIC-4 weapon design alongside fifty kilograms of HEU in 1981, material sufficient for two bombs".²⁴ China has provided assistance in the building of Khushab reactor and Chasma reactor and Plutonium reprocessing facility and the PARR-2 research reactor at Rawalpindi.²⁵ This assistance from china helped in increasing "the pace of Pakistan's weaponization programme and allowed it to produce enough nuclear fission devices in the mid to late 1990s to deter an Indian attack. Over the years, the Pakistani nuclear program evolved into the most significant symbol of national determination and a central element of Pakistan's identity".²⁶

22 Ibid, p.176.

23 Paul (2005).p.181

24 Khan (2012), p. 188

25 Paul(2005) p.181

26 Ibid. p. 2

Conclusion

Posture optimization theory correctly predicts the nature of strategic completion in South Asia especially the nuclear strategies of various actors and the effect of changing balance of power on stability in south Asia. It correctly predicts that Pakistan's nuclear inventory is only going to increase²⁷ due to its extreme reliance on nuclear deterrence against a conventionally superior India. India's missile capabilities and conventional arms spending would also increase continuously due to a gradual rise in Chinese military and nuclear capabilities. Chinese defense policies are overwhelmingly focused on the American military and nuclear capabilities in the region. This has created a vicious security triangle in South Asia, which seems irresolvable in the near future.

States optimise their postures according to their security interests which are primarily determined by the capabilities of rival states and the overall balance of power in the region. Regional stability is only possible if the states feel that that the capabilities of other states do not pose a significant threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The biggest threat to regional stability is the ensuing arms race in the region that is exacerbated by the strategic and conventional arms race between China and America. Due to these factors regional cooperation at the strategic level is not completely possible only by the efforts at the bilateral level between India and Pakistan. De-escalation at the Sino-American strategic competition level can only ease pressure on India and Pakistan and hence provide fresh avenues for regional cooperation.

27 For evidence, see, Kristensen & Norris. (2015). Pakistani Nuclear Forces. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 71 (6), 59-66.
