

INDIA-PAKISTAN CRISES AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION: A STUDY OF STRATEGIC RISK

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Abstract:

Historical, territorial, and political differences between India and Pakistan have turned the old-time rivalry between the two countries into a deadly strategic rivalry after their nuclearization in 1998. This paper discusses the role of the possession of nuclear weapons on crisis behavior, intensification of security dilemmas, and the high probability of inadvertent escalation in South Asia. It dwells upon the main crises such as the Kargil conflict (1999), Mumbai attacks (2008), and Pulwama-Balakot standoff (2019), showing a paradox of deterrence that nuclear weapons prevent a full-scale war, but at the same time, it allows limited-scale conflicts under the umbrella of nuclear weapons. Based on both the theoretic frameworks of Stability-Instability paradox and the Escalation Dominance, the paper analyzes the reasons why no first use doctrine at India and Full Spectrum Deterrence doctrine at Pakistan (Doctrines of asymmetry) contribute to the increase in misperceptions and crisis instability. It further examines how tactical nuclear weapons, new technology and lack of effective crisis communication influence escalation dynamics. Additionally, the paper plays a very significant role in international mediation in de-escalating tensions. This study contends through a qualitative review of literature, policy reports, and case studies of the nuclear crises that the structural weaknesses of South Asian security architecture, coupled with nationalist politics and technological developments have greatly increased the strategic threat of a nuclear arms buildup between India and Pakistan.

Keywords: Nuclear deterrence, India-Pakistan crises, strategic risk, stability-instability paradox, escalation dominance, tactical nuclear weapons.

1. Introduction:

Since the inception of British rule in 1947, Pakistan and India have indulged in a deep, hostile, and conflict-prone relationship due to territorial disputes over Kashmir, ethnicity, religion, culture, nationalism, and political tensions. The past decades had been given the evidence of their brutal hostility by the four major wars (1947, 1965, 1971, 1999), multiple military standoffs, and continuous cross-border crises. The issue behind the war is over Kashmir territory, due to the unfair distribution by the British viceroy that had caused the long and unsolved conflict. With the addition of nuclear weapons, the rivalry had evolved into high-stakes strategic competition. In addition, Pakistan and India both have become a global threat as well as a regional one.

The nuclearization of both countries in 1998 marked a pivotal shift in their strategic tier. They are introducing a new dimension of menace and deterrence into an already eruptive relationship. The possession of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan has fundamentally altered the calculus of conflict, raising critical objections about the stability of deterrence and the potential for nuclear escalation during crises. Due to the nuclear arsenal tensions in South Asia, the risk of miscommunication may cause huge destruction.

This research paper analyzes the major factors that have been triggering the escalation of nuclear arsenals in South Asia. While preserving the nuclear capabilities, they have influenced the behavior of both states during political turmoil. Nuclear weapons deter full-scale war, but the risk of limited conflict and accidental escalation remains high. Pakistan and India both have developed doctrines; India focused on “No First Use,” while Pakistan focused on “Full Spectrum Deterrence.” The past configured crisis tested the limits of nuclear deterrence and increased the strategic risk of miscalculation or inadvertent escalation. The proxy conflicts and limited military engagements between India and Pakistan, due to lack of crisis communication,

rising nationalism, and militant proxies, continue to fuel the fire, which ended up in destruction and limited war.

Background

India and Pakistan are traditionally defined by severe levels of enmity, repetitive military clashes, and long-standing political conflicts, especially after the division of British India in 1947. The direct sequence of events after 1947 was the first point of departure in this deep-rooted geopolitical confrontation, where Jammu and Kashmir became the major hot spot. This land conflict has led to four conventional wars (1965, 1971, and 1999) and several military standoffs, as well as a long-standing pattern and history of cross-border tensions and conflicts. Bilateral relations have been further worsened by ethno-religious disparity, historical wrongs, and varied national identities, which has instead resulted in a series of mistrust and strategic insecurity.

South Asian security developments have been transformed as a result of the overt nuclearization that happened in the year 1998 in both India and Pakistan. The act of putting these states on the map as de facto nuclear powers changed the strategic calculus of the subcontinent and established a paradoxical relationship with the nuclear weapons: there is an existence of deterrent capabilities of the nuclear weapons but they also facilitate the risk-taking behaviours with the help of the so-called nuclear umbrella. Such dangerous state is observable in post-nuclear crises such as that of Kargil conflict (1999), Twin Peaks crisis (2012), Mumbai attacks (2008) and the Pulwama-Balakot standoff (2019), wherein the standoff remains proximately imaginable despite the presumed existence of deterrence.

India and Pakistan have made doctrinal options to make the region more unstable. The concept of No First Use (NFU) by India is in sharp contrast to that of Pakistan of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) whose implication implies a willingness to use tactical nuclear weapons to combat conventional threats. This type of doctrinal asymmetry increases the risk of misperception, miscalculation, and inadvertent escalation especially when there are no effective mechanisms of crisis communication.

The Asia-Pacific region has a very volatile strategic environment where the impact of such volatility is enhanced due to the involvement of non-state players, the continued presence of trans-national terrorism and the revival of political ideology fuelled nationalism. These developments make it hard to understand the rational-actor version of the deterrence theory, which assumes instrumentally motivated, calculated behaviour by state actors.

Moreover, the context of the weak effectiveness of confidence-building measures (CBMs), the ambiguity of military doctrines, and the mushrooming abilities in the spheres of cyber and space have encapsulated the area within the evermore tangled security framework. Such dynamics reveal the necessity of future research attention given to the Asia-Pacific as an arena of strategic volatility and volatility sources that could be studied systematically.

In the complex environment of international security today, the relationship between India and Pakistan concerning nuclear arms ties is an extremely sensitive and a trouble-some spot. There can be no viable regional stability, and there can be no global effectiveness of nuclear stability, without a nuanced understanding of the forces, trends and mutually reinforcing trends that drive such relationships. With that purpose, the current paper asks the question of how strategic discourses, political decision making, and crisis behavior interact to beget nuclear danger in South Asia, and considers structural and perceptual factors that make this couplet especially likely to lose control.

Hypothesis:

The nukes in South Asia have soared, and the political tensions and miscommunication between two predominant states have increased the risk of inadvertent escalation during crises.

Research Questions:

- What are the major factors that triggered the escalation in India-Pakistan crises?
- How does the presence of nuclear weapons influence the crisis behavior of India and Pakistan?
- Is the strategic risk between Pakistan and India increasing the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation in South Asia?

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the major factors that triggered escalation in India-Pakistan crises.
2. To examine how the presence of nuclear weapons influences the crisis behavior of India and Pakistan.
3. To assess whether strategic risks between Pakistan and India are increasing inadvertent nuclear escalation in South Asia.

2. Literature Review:

Kaura, in his article (2019), "Indo-Israeli Relations in the Modi Era: A Transformative Shift", explores the vital evolution of India-Israel relations under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He focuses on Modi's historic 2017 visit to Israel in order to celebrate 25 years of full diplomatic ties, which also elevated the India-Israel strategic partnership, focusing on areas like counterterrorism, space programmes, agriculture, technology and cyber security. Moreover, India has prioritised Israel over other West Asian countries, emphasising realpolitik over ideological constraints. Kaura has focused on India's symbolised de-hyphenation policy, mutual benefits and the changing geopolitical landscape, including China's rise, U.S. ambivalence and shifting dynamics in West Asia, which have made closer India-Israel ties more feasible.

Pandya in his article (2019), "The Future of Indo-Pak Relations after the Pulwama Attack", believes that the post-Pulwama crisis saw a change of strategic positioning by India. The event confirmed that India was ready to take a more aggressive approach to any terrorism sponsored by Pakistan even to the point of overstepping sovereign borders and turning it into a conventional war. Pandya says that the Balakot airstrikes were indicative of India increasing its resolve to deal with terrorism with aggressive actions, implying the abandonment of the previous policy of restraint. The fact that the Pulwama-Balakot incident internationalized the Kashmir conflict. Pandya underlines that under wide publicity of the media all over the world and diplomatic involvement, the problem of Kashmir could not be a local issue but had possible international consequences. This is in line with larger bodies of literature that indicate how terrorism-related events tend to redefine the lines of regional security and introduce national conflicts to the international arena.

Pandya, therefore, highlights that the Pulwama crisis was not a single episode but a revolution in the Indo-Pak relations. It strengthened the preparedness of India to pre-emptive strike, increased the risk of intensification, and guaranteed the international community that never before seen attention was given to the Kashmir conflict.

Siyech in his article (2019), "The Pulwama Attack: Significance, Implications and the Way Forward", holds that the Pulwama incident was a trigger in the Indo-Pak relations as it brought both states to the verge of war. He points out that airstrikes by India against Balakot and the counter-attack by Pakistan reduced the conflict level within South Asia. With the three-Rs of that framework, proposed by Louise Richardson (Revenge, Renown, Reaction), Siyech justifies why Jaish-e-Mohammed has had such a significant effect and why it can result in a state-level response. The research finds that without proper crisis management systems, terrorist organizations will not stop taking advantage of Indo-Pak animosity thus internationalizing the Kashmir conflict and perpetuating the instability of the region.

Zahra and Liaqat in their article (2023), "India-Israel Strategic Cooperation: Implications for Pakistan", focusing on the strengthening Indo-Israel alliance has gone a notch higher in

previous areas like defense, space, cyber-space, and intelligence exchange. They point out that such a cooperation improves the process of military modernization in India, which gives it a technological advantage in South Asia. They argue in the study that this kind of progress does not only reinforce the hegemony of India but also generates a strategic imbalance in the region. In the case of Pakistan, the imbalance is a major security threat and forces it to think of ways of counteracting it in order to keep the region stable. The authors point out that the course of the Indo-Israel relations, uncontrolled in the future, would reduce the strategic balance of Pakistan and exacerbate the insecurity in the region.

Mustafa , Bhatti and Hussain in their article (2019), “Indo-Israel Relations: Implications for Pakistan ”, they consider the development of India-Israel relations since the Cold War, and in particular, their growth in civilian and military spheres. They emphasize the collaboration in such aspects as trade, agriculture, water management and city building, yet add that the collaboration in defense is the central one in the partnership. According to the authors, the implications of these relations becoming increasingly closer to Pakistan are grave, such as the threat to its national security, problems in the sphere of the economies, and the growing isolation within the region. The paper highlights that Indo-Israel collaboration is destabilizing the South Asian balance of power and increasing the security predicaments and strategic weaknesses of the Pakistani state.

Khan in his article (2020), “Development in Indo-Israel Defence Relations Since 9/11: Pakistan’s Security Concern and Policy Options ”, emphasizes the dramatic growth of Indian-Israel defense alliance in the post 9/11 period. He predicts that the two states have the perception of Pakistan as a common enemy, and this is what causes them to align strategically. In the case of India, the alliance vastly benefits the interests of Israel since it guarantees qualitative and quantitative superiority over Pakistan, thus, allowing New Delhi to disregard control in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. In the eyes of Israel, close relations with India not only give it a market in the defense industry, but also, it will be able to counter Pakistan along with its support of the Arab states and its nuclear capabilities that would empower its potential competitors in the region. Khan concludes that such an increasing defense cooperation not only negates the security and integrity of Pakistan but also transforms the power balance in Asia.

Sharma and Lutmar in their article (2025), “Triangular Ties: Exploring India-Israel Strategic Cooperation Amidst India-Pakistan Relations”, discuss how the repetition of Indo-Pak conflicts has enabled India and Israel to have closer strategic relations. The authors present such milestones like the Kargil War, the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, and the 2016 attack at Balakot to demonstrate how the Pakistan-related security issues reinforced the dependence of India on Israel as a defense partner and counterterrorism ally. They claim that mutual security issues and overlapping political interests have changed bilateral relations to become a practical and long-lasting partnership. The paper highlights that the animosity between India and Pakistan has played a key role in fostering India-Israel cooperation, especially on the aspect of defense, intelligence and security which has altered the strategic environment of South Asia.

3. Theoretical Framework :

In this study, the author combines two strategic theories, Stability-Instability Paradox and Escalation Dominance, to methodically examine repeat crises and the threat of escalation between India and Pakistan. The comparison of the theories results in a multifaceted image of deterrence that allows one to judge the strategic conduct of nuclear-armed adversaries more subtly.

3.1 Stability–Instability Paradox

The Stability Instability Paradox introduced in the landmark publication by Glenn Snyder explains that an intense strategic nuclear deterrence can ironically contribute to a greater

instability in case of the de-escalation or limited confrontation. In this context, the existence of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan creates an extent of strategic stability, which reduces the possibility of erupting into an all-out war. However, such stability increases the confidence of the decision-makers in both states to engage in limited military conflicts without being too afraid that such an endeavor will end on the level of major conflicts because there is a threat of nuclear retaliation. Examples of crises occurring under the condition of this nuclear umbrella include the Kargil War (1999), the Mumbai attacks (2008) and the Pulwama Balakot crisis (2019), and include being foundational towards the end.

3.2 Escalation Dominance

The opposite to the paradox of escalation is called Escalation Dominance, this is a measure of the ability of each of the possible opposition sides to win an encounter at any level of escalation. The doctrine states that states develop the capabilities as military, technologies, or doctrines so that they can control the ladder of escalation and hence deter an adversary.

Examples in the India Pakistan that exist, such as India one signaling in the articulation of its Cold Start Doctrine and Pakistan another exhibit in its use of the tactical nuclear weapon which signals different possibilities of adapting to Escalation Dominance at different stages of a conflict. India expresses escalation dominance through a quick conventional build up, whereas Pakistan, through the threat of pre-emptive nuclear employment. Under these dynamics and the added effect of political drives, technological breakthroughs, and narrow channels of communication, the probability of misperception, miscalculation, and extremely fast vertical escalation during crises are raised accordingly.

3.3 Relevance

Leading from the concept of two theories the Stability Instability Paradox and the Escalation Dominance in this article, what each one of them brings is a rigorous perspective in which to analyze the South Asian strategic risks taking place in the region. The Stability Instability Paradox explains why crises keep recurring, notwithstanding the nuclear deterrence, and the Escalation Dominance explains the strategic issues at stake in escalation management or even manipulation. Nevertheless, an effective quest of superiority on various stages may destabilize the deterrence situation rather effectively, increasing the risk that at least one of them can touch the nuclear threshold, either deliberately or accidentally. With the help of such theoretical constructs, the paper will explore how postures, crisis practices, and risk-taking of India Pakistan brings about a precarious balance and assess conditions in which the next crisis is likely to explode out of proportion.

4. Research Methodology:

This article focuses on the analytical and descriptive data analysis used to explore the study. A detailed study has been conducted using books, readings, research papers, and newspapers etc. The research design employed in this study is a qualitative approach. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of India-Pakistan Crisis and Nuclear Escalation and a Strategic Risk. The qualitative methods include a systematic literature review, and content analysis of official documents.

5. Discussion:

5.1. The Role of Nuclear Deterrence in India-Pakistan Crises

Since India and Pakistan tested their nuclear weapons in 1998, nuclear deterrence constituted the core aspect of the South Asia strategic environment. Although deterrence can be said to have ensured that a full-blown war is avoided, it has not entirely averted crises. Rather, nuclear weapons have introduced a limit beyond which neither nation is willing to go and above which destruction will ensure both countries do not escalate further under conventional military display and sub-conventional maneuvers. Such crises as Kargil War (1999), and the PulwamaBalakot crisis (2019) offer an illustration of how the use of nuclear weapons is seen

under the umbrella of nuclear deterrence. However, the absence of conventionalized arms control mechanisms along with the presence of doctrine uncertainty keeps hampering the stability that nuclear deterrence is intended to make.

5.2. Impact of Tactical Nuclear Weapons on Escalation Dynamics

The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), including the Nasr missile system, by Pakistan is a significant change in the deterrence system of South Asia. These low-yield instruments are formulated to be utilized in the battlefield, and their intention is to have a counter effect on conventional Indian superiority and such doctrines as Cold Start. Nevertheless, by being put into use, the nuclear threshold is reduced, and there is a likelihood of accidental or unauthorized usage, especially during the fog of war. TNWs have made it ambiguous between conventional and nuclear spheres and formed an elaborate situation in an exhaustive environment. Instead of stabilizing the situation, TNWs will be a source of deterrence instability, as the time that will be available to make decisions during a high-stakes conflict will be limited.

5.3. Influence of Emerging Military Technologies on Strategic Stability

The advent of a new era of technologies, including the hypersonic missiles, cyber warfare, use of satellite-based surveillance, and AI in the battlefields systems are raising concerns in strategic stability in South Asia. These technologies reduce the time of response, elevate uncertainty, and command-and-control systems become susceptible to interference. The fact that Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) has been introduced by India and that the introduction of MIRVs on both sides would weaken the fact that there is a mutual vulnerability concept which is the core issue into stable deterrence. Since implementing these disruptive capabilities in India and Pakistan will be without relation to transparency or agreements, there is a great deal of risk that one side will miscalculate and initiate a preemptive strike.

5.4. Crisis Management Challenges in a Nuclearized South Asia

There are severe constraints in managing the crisis between India and Pakistan because there is no institutionalized communication, there is poor backchannel diplomacy and there are political pressures of domestic politics which need stern measures. South Asia does not have reliable well-established mechanisms of nuclear crisis management, in contrast to Cold War-era structures such as the U.S.Soviet hotlines, the arm control treaties. In addition, the speed in which an issue escalates, usually fueled by the media and the populace, makes rational decision-making quite difficult. The example of the Pulwamas-Balakot incident emphasized that the two nations react massively using force under the nuclear overhang thus there is minimal possibility of third-party mediation or de-escalation process. This is what underlines the necessity to organize settings of structured dialogue, red lines, and crisis simulation exercises to avoid risk of escalation.

5.5. The Stability-Instability Paradox and Its Manifestation in Indo-Pak Relations

South Asian strategic stability is being affected by the emerging technologies like the hypersonic missiles, cyber warfare, space-based surveillance, and the use of artificial intelligence in battlefield systems. The technologies reduce the time to reaction, raise uncertainty and render the command-and-control systems more susceptible to interference. The introduction of Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) by India, together with possible MIRV deployment by each side degrades the concept of mutual vulnerability that is ironic in stable deterrence. Since neither India nor Pakistan is willing to expose itself to the same disruptive capabilities as well as agree to the same transparent

5.6. The Role of International Mediation and Diplomatic Efforts

Interestingly, international players have played their minuscule, yet sometimes important roles in reducing Indian-Pakistani crises. The United States, China, Russia and the United Nations have all taken part in the high tension moments in a diplomatic manner. Nonetheless the issues

of sovereignty and mistrust tend to limit the usefulness of external mediation. Although the U.S. has been behind the scenes in whether it is Kargil or the 2019 standoff, to consider long-term, episodic measures are not enough. Political stalemate has occurred in the regional organizations such as SAARC which have not institutionalized the peace building efforts. Thus, international involvement, track II diplomacy, and crisis resolution tools should be maintained at a high level to help the region achieve stability in the nuclearized environment.

6. Conclusion:

India-Pakistan relationship is one of the longest standing security dilemmas of the international system. Based on the unsolved Kashmir crisis and the historical animosity it has developed, this war has transformed itself into a highly nuclearized warfare. The nuclear tests conducted in 1998 changed the strategic situation in South Asia, bringing the element of deterrence, which has not allowed a full-scale war, but causing the emergence of the risk of regular crises. This is a manifestation of the Stability–Instability Paradox, with nuclear deterrence reducing the possibility of the entire war, but stimulating small-scale conflicts within the shadow of nuclear warfare.

Asymmetry of doctrine, between India and Pakistan, in terms of No First Use policy of India and Full Spectrum Deterrence of Pakistan, has already made the stability of the crisis even more complicated. Subsequent developments of the tactical nuclear weapons, improvement of missile defense, and new technological advances have minimized decision-making times, increased the risk of misperception and unintentional escalation. The pattern of brinkmanship and hasty crisis management is observed in the past crises of Kargil (1999), Mumbai (2008), and Pulwama Balakot (2019): Each time, external actors take the ad hoc role of mediator instead of maintaining stable conditions.

In order to mitigate these strategic risks, the two states need to institutionalize the confidence-building strategies, enhance the communication lines and think about the arms control systems which would decrease the level of crisis instability. The international actors are able to facilitate formalized dialogue and crisis management systems that can deter the escalation. In conclusion it is necessary that both India and Pakistan should exercise strategic restraint through responsible nuclear stewardship and diplomatic involvement in South Asian issues to achieve ultimate stability.

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