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RESEARCH PAPER

Towards Stability: A Theoretical Analysis of Strategic Choices in South Asia's Deterrence Environment

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates strategic stability in South Asia's deterrence landscape post-1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan. Examining nuclear capabilities, it highlights the region's evolving dynamics. Focusing on strategic stability's significance, the study probes India's escalation tendencies and Pakistan's deterrence reliance, fueling discourse on preemptive strategies and first-use doctrines. Using qualitative methodology, it seeks to understand 'strategic stability' and pinpoint factors fostering regional instability. Aligned with neorealism, the research argues that nuclear weapons' dire consequences stabilize the international system. Thus, it offers insights into strategic decision-making, and suggests strategies to bolster stability and avert conflict escalation in South Asia's deterrence framework. As a result, it provides insights into the likelihood of escalation and the challenges posed by differing threat perceptions and capabilities. This study recommends vital insights into South Asia's nuclear dynamics, advocating for measures to enhance stability and mitigate conflict risks.

KEYWORDS Deterrence, Escalation, India, Nuclear Doctrines, Pakistan, Strategic Stability

Introduction

Strategic stability is founded on the core principle of deterring potential adversaries from initiating a surprise attack, ensuring the resilience of one's nuclear arsenal, and maintaining the capability to respond effectively. This mutual deterrence framework discourages preemptive strikes and helps prevent the outbreak of conflict. Key to achieving strategic stability is the mutual acknowledgment by both parties of the impracticality and undesirability of engaging in crisis and nuclear arms race. It requires explicit articulation of nuclear doctrines and a demonstrated commitment by leadership to deter nuclear exchanges. The term "strategic stability" encompasses a range of meanings, sometimes narrowly referring to dynamics within the realm of nuclear weapons and at other times encompassing broader dimensions including non-nuclear aspects of stability (Legvold & Chyba, 2020). The conceptual landscape of strategic stability is intricate, encompassing various interconnected principles of deterrence theory. This paradigm rested on the acknowledgment by both nations that maintaining the ability to withstand a first strike while retaining the capacity for devastating retaliation was crucial for stability. Scholars and policymakers grappled with defining and conceptualizing strategic stability throughout the Cold War era and beyond. This complex interplay highlights the challenge of understanding strategic stability, necessitating an integrated approach that considers diverse yet interconnected concepts, particularly in light of the evolving multipolar dynamics shaping the contemporary global landscape. Since the overt nuclearization in 1998, South Asia has experienced numerous instances of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, particularly concerning the disputed territory of Kashmir and issues of cross-border terrorism. This volatile dynamic has been exacerbated by various factors, including technological

advancements in military capabilities, doctrinal shifts, the lack of effective risk reduction measures, limited communication and dialogue channels between the two nations, skepticism towards non-proliferation efforts, and the divergent regional and global interests of major powers. In response to these strategic considerations, India has pursued the development of new doctrines that enable effective retaliation while remaining below the threshold of nuclear escalation. Conversely, Pakistan has sought to bolster its comprehensive nuclear deterrence posture by developing low-yield nuclear weapons (Hagerty, 2020). Furthermore, India has been investing in ballistic missile defense systems (BMDs) and enhancing its sea-based nuclear deterrent capabilities, thereby adding complexity to the bilateral nuclear landscape. In parallel, Pakistan has sought to bolster its naval nuclear deterrence capabilities, thus contributing to the escalating nuclear trajectories in the region (Abid, 2022). The proliferation of nuclear arsenals and the evolving strategies of both countries have already begun destabilizing the strategic equilibrium in South Asia. Despite this destabilization, nuclear deterrence has played a role in managing escalation during significant crises such as the Kargil war (1999), the Twin Peaks Crisis (2001-2002), the Mumbai attacks (2008), the Pathankot incident (2016), and 2019 crisis following an Indian missile strike in Balakot and subsequent aerial skirmishes between India and Pakistan ((Ali & Sidhu, 2022). Persistent instability marked by doctrinal innovations, border skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC), enduring conflict dynamics, proxy engagements, cross-border terrorism, and support for separatists by both India and Pakistan have turned the region into a volatile nuclear flashpoint, posing a substantial threat to international peace and stability (Clary & Narang, 2018).

The primary objective of this inquiry is threefold: firstly, to undertake a nuanced examination of divergent conceptualizations of strategic stability, thereby endeavoring to delineate a shared understanding thereof; secondly, to trace the literature of strategic stability in South Asia, elucidating the respective perspectives of India and Pakistan regarding the role and utility of their nuclear arsenals within this framework; and thirdly, to dissect the intricate dynamics of the strategic choices available for India and Pakistan. By doing so, it aims to provide a scholarly vantage point from which to scrutinize how both scholars of nuclear deterrence and policymakers have grappled with the imperatives posed by the ongoing nuclear and technological transformations. Through this analytical lens, the study endeavors to contribute a critical academic perspective to the discourse surrounding the strategic calculus and decision-making processes in South Asia.

Literature Review

The study has undertaken a systematic classification of the literature on deterrence stability, delineating five distinct waves that correspond to observed empirical shifts like conflict and strategic planning about the deployment and utilization of weapons of mass destruction. Building upon the seminal contributions of scholars such as Robert Jervis, the research has revisited deterrence theory and identified three primary waves of inquiry within the nuclear deterrence literature (Jervis, 1979). Jeffrey Knopf (2010) and Ieva Karachiite (2019) later added the fourth and fifth waves of Jervis' classification, respectively. Bernard Brodie, Arnold Wolfers, Jacob Viner, and Vannevar Bush were individuals who were ahead of their time in the field (Bush, 1951; Miller, 2014; Viner, 1946; Wolfers, 1953). They began by quietly discussing the dire repercussions of nuclear weapons, laying the groundwork for deterrence theory with clear and rational definitions. Regarded as pioneers in the initial wave of deterrence and strategic stability literature, they played a pivotal role. Deterrence emerged as a focal point in International Relations following the catastrophic events of nuclear warfare in 1945. The looming

threat of further nuclear assaults elevated deterrence to the forefront of global military concerns. Nuclear armaments were perceived as a deterrent capable of compelling adversaries to cease hostilities or dissuading them from initiating attacks through the specter of retaliatory action. Among the foremost scholars in International Relations (IR), Bernard Brodie elucidated the concept of deterrence mere months after the nuclear bombings of Japan:

"...the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose… There is happily little disposition to believe that the atomic bomb by its mere existence and the horror implicit in it 'makes war impossible'... At this point, it should be clear how drastic the changes in character, equipment, and outlook which the traditional armed forces must undergo if they are to act as real deterrents to aggression in an age of atomic bombs."(Brodie, 1946)

Brodie's groundbreaking contribution established the bedrock of deterrence theory within the realist framework of international relations. Its essence lies in persuading potential aggressors to abstain from hostile actions by highlighting formidable military strength and the credible threat of inflicting intolerable consequences upon any act of aggression. However, this initial cohort of scholars in the deterrence discourse faced a deficiency in systematic organization, as their emphasis rested more on conceptual delineation than addressing specific national security concerns.

In the *second wave*, Thomas Schelling (2008), Albert Wohlstetter (1958), Alexander George, and Richard Smoke (1989) elucidated the concept of deterring attacks as the focal point of deterrence in international affairs. In bridging deterrence with game theory, Thomas Schelling posited that deterrence involves leveraging potential force to convince a likely adversary to refrain from certain activities in their own best interest. He eloquently characterized deterrence theory as a "theory of skillful nonuse of military force," emphasizing that effective deterrence necessitates capabilities beyond mere military prowess (Schelling, 1960). The second wave of literature offers a compelling definition of deterrence theory, emphasizing its paradoxical nature wherein each side seeks security not through defensive capabilities, but by threatening to inflict unacceptable damage on the other. Jervis notes that a significant portion of the second wave employs the game of Chicken as an analogy (Jervis, 1979).

The *third wave* of academic literature on nuclear deterrence emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, building upon concepts developed in earlier waves during the Cold War. A group of scholars engaged in a debate regarding the rationality of decision-making in nuclear deterrence and enriched deterrence theory (Allison, Blackwill, Carnesale, Nye, & P., 1990; Glenn H. Snyder, 1984; Modelski & Morgan, 1985; Morgan, 1977; Stein, 1989). They conducted case studies and statistical analyses to explore this topic. Lebow and Stein argued that deterrence theory cannot predict the rationality of decision-makers.. Robert Jervis suggested that rationality alone may not be enough to deter aggression, as emotional impulsiveness could lead to irrational actions. This could deviate from a rational course and potentially result in conflict. Scholars debated decision-making rationality in nuclear deterrence and enriched deterrence theory. Lebow and Stein argued that deterrence theory lacks predictability on decision-makers rationality. Jervis suggested that rationality may not suffice to deter aggression, as emotional impulsiveness could lead to irrational actions and potentially result in conflict (Jervis, 1979). Conventional deterrence literature is often overlooked, with a focus usually on unconventional deterrence. However, John Mearsheimer argued that deterring an

enemy holds the same significance, whether done conventionally or unconventionally. The core of nuclear deterrence theory is the ability to inflict immediate and overwhelming punishment on the adversary (Mearsheimer, 1985).

Notable authors of the *fourth wave* contended that the threat of nuclear exchange diminished with the conclusion of the Cold War. However, new dynamics in nuclear studies surfaced, placing greater emphasis on the risks posed by nuclear terrorism, the potential acquisition of nuclear and radioactive materials by non-state actors, the challenges of nuclear proliferation, cybersecurity, missile defense, and artificial intelligence (Chari, 2003; Cheema, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Gray, 2000; Khan, 2003; Paul, 1995; Paul, Morgan, & Wirtz, 2009; Perkovich, 1994; Rajagopalan, 2006; Sagan, 2009; Zagare & Kilgour, 2000). Lawrence Freedman added that the "fears of a carbon summer took over from those of a nuclear winter. To the extent that disarmament has come back in vogue, it is because of other dangers, notably those associated with the risks of nuclear weapons becoming entangled with failing or rogue states, or with terrorists" (Freedman, 2009). In his examination, Michael Krepon studied the relevance of Glen Snyder's 'stability/instability paradox' to the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan. He used the research of scholars from South Asia and beyond to support his argument. Krepon argued that the manifestation of "offsetting nuclear capabilities increasing tensions between adversaries" has been evident in South Asia (Rajagopalan, 2006). Sumit Ganguly (2002) also contended that the Kargil war between India and Pakistan closely adhered to the expectations of the stability/instability paradox. Paul Kapur (2005) believed that the ongoing low-level conflict between India and Pakistan resulted "from a different strategic environment, in which instability in the nuclear realm encourages instability at lower levels of conflict," which confirms an instability/instability paradox.

The concept of nuclear deterrence has evolved through five waves of literature. The fifth and most recent wave takes into account the findings of the previous one. Scholars, analysts, and experts in the field of deterrence studies have recognized the emergence of a new wave of deterrence studies in today's multipolar world. The current era is marked by a multitude of sources of instability such as terrorism, cyber attacks, artificial intelligence, proxy wars, and hybrid warfare. Experts believe that there is a renewed interest in nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent, a concept that was believed to have been left behind in the Cold War era. This renewed interest in deterrence discourse is due to the increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in the nuclear doctrines of China, Russia, and the US. Furthermore, the arms race between India and Pakistan, which challenges the faith in the reliability of mutually assured destruction, has contributed to this renewed interest. (Abbasi & Khan, 2019; Acton, 2020; Clary & Narang, 2018; Kanwal, 2017; Krepon, White, Thompson, & Mason, 2015; Kroenig, 2018; Lieber & Press, 2017; Salik, 2016; Spiegeleire, Holynska, Batoh, & Sweijs, 2020)

Scholars closely observe different aspects of deterrence, including conventional and nuclear deterrence. According to scholars like James J. Wirtz, deterrence helps to bring about changes in international relations by trying to prevent war or stop undesirable events from occurring. Wirtz differentiates between conventional and unconventional deterrence. He argues that conventional deterrence is debatable and can be contested, while unconventional deterrence is seen as undeniable (Wirtz, 2018). The effectiveness of deterrence, whether it is conventional or unconventional, depends not only on the ability to carry out the threat but also on credibility. Credibility refers to the confidence that the opponent will actually follow through on their warning if certain limits are crossed. A state can maintain credible deterrence even with a limited number of nuclear weapons if it possesses a second-strike retaliatory capability, which would result in catastrophe for all parties involved. Keith Payne (2011) well summarized

Frederick the Great's words that "deterrence without nuclear weapons is like an orchestra without instruments that can produce noise but probably not the desired music".

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of strategic stability in South Asia encompasses a multifaceted approach that integrates concepts from international relations theory, strategic studies, and regional security dynamics. Drawing upon these theoretical foundations, the framework seeks to elucidate the conditions necessary for achieving and maintaining stability in the strategic interactions between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed adversaries in the region. The theoretical discourse surrounding the role of nuclear weapons and the foundational concept of strategic stability evokes divergent perspectives among scholars, policymakers, and analysts. Within this discourse, proponents of nuclear optimism assert the pivotal role of nuclear arsenals in forestalling the escalation of conflicts into full-scale wars, thereby contributing to the preservation of peace and strategic stability in regions such as South Asia. Central to the argument is the contention that nuclear weapons serve as a potent deterrent against aggression, thereby effectively constraining the propensity for conflict escalation between the region's two nuclear-capable adversaries (Mistry, 2009). Conversely, adherents to the school of nuclear pessimism posit a contrasting viewpoint, positing that nuclear weapons represent a destabilizing force within the strategic calculus of states (Kapur, 2008). According to this perspective, the possession of nuclear capabilities introduces incentives for engaging in lower-level conflicts, thereby exacerbating regional tensions and increasing the likelihood of conflict escalation. Moreover, nuclear pessimists contend that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states is often driven by a myriad of motivations, including the desire to deter a militarily superior adversary, attain military parity, enhance bargaining leverage, reduce dependence on external military assistance, or assert national self-reliance (Cheema, 2011).

This theoretical dichotomy underscores the complexities inherent in assessing the impact of nuclear weapons on strategic stability, with divergent interpretations regarding their efficacy as deterrent instruments and their implications for conflict dynamics. As such, it underscores the importance of critically evaluating the multifaceted dimensions of nuclear proliferation and its ramifications for regional security dynamics. Through rigorous analysis and empirical inquiry, scholars and policymakers can strive to elucidate the nuanced interplay between nuclear capabilities, strategic stability, and the broader geopolitical landscape, thereby informing effective policy responses and conflict resolution mechanisms in regions characterized by nuclear rivalries.

The underlying thesis of this research aligns with the neorealist perspective, contending that the formidable repercussions associated with the use of nuclear weapons serve as a stabilizing force within the international system. According to this argument, rational states are inherently disinclined to undertake risky actions for marginal gains, as the specter of potential retaliation renders the pursuit of victory in a nuclear conflict untenable. However, this thesis encounters its antithesis, which posits that the ongoing nuclear revolution and advancements in technology are eroding the foundational pillars of nuclear deterrence, thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of existing deterrent mechanisms. This erosion is attributed to the advent of remote sensing capabilities and enhanced precision targeting, which have rendered the concealment and survivability of nuclear arsenals increasingly challenging (Gortzak, Haftel, & Sweeney, 2005).

Within the security milieu of South Asia, there exists a discernible trend towards offensive dominance, wherein states are inclined towards preemptive strikes and preventive wars as a means of safeguarding their security interests. This shift towards offensive postures is often associated with various war-inducing phenomena, including reduced incentives for diplomatic conflict resolution, escalatory arms races, and territorial expansionism driven by defensive and opportunistic motives. Indeed, the pursuit of offensive provocations is predicated on the belief that preemptively eliminating potential threats is the most viable strategy for ensuring national security. Against this backdrop, the fragile strategic equilibrium of South Asia is further compounded by India's ongoing military modernization efforts and its conventional superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan. This power asymmetry induces Pakistan to gradually rely on nuclear weapons as a cornerstone of its defense strategy, with a pronounced emphasis on a first-use nuclear doctrine vis-à-vis India. Concurrently, India's adoption of a No-First-Use (NFU) doctrine is underpinned by a multitude of factors, including its conventional military superiority, economic resources, and strategic partnerships with leading defense entities worldwide (Narang, 2017).

Pakistan's Strategic Choices in South Asia's Deterrence Environment

The study examined how Pakistan is striving to achieve strategic stability in view of India's doctrinal changes and its inclination towards counterforce strategies. The theoretical frameworks of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability, established during the Cold War, were used to gain insights into the dynamics of the asymmetric conflict relationship between India and Pakistan. A group of deterrence theorists suggests that since both India and Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities, they will avoid engaging in full-scale warfare (Ganguly, 2008). Conversely, another group of theorists contends that strategic stability remains complex due to ongoing technological advancements, doctrinal changes and deficiencies, terrorism, and strategies involving sub-conventional warfare (Khan, 2015). Both groups of theorists concluded that nuclear deterrence was more stable between the US and the USSR than between India and Pakistan despite their differences. The dynamics of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability in South Asia support the assumptions made by both groups of theorists. It is evident that the emphasis on acquiring and innovating military technologies to ensure offensive dominance, alongside the involvement of both parties in sub-conventional conflicts within the South Asian nuclear dyad, has challenged the fundamental assertions of the first group of scholars.

Theoretical frameworks of deterrence and strategic stability have been tested against the backdrop of technological advancements and doctrinal adaptations. It is important to understand how deterrence and strategic stability are interconnected. This involves analyzing and synthesizing various components of the nuclear revolution and associated doctrines. The goal is to determine whether sub-conventional conflicts, which carry existential threats, could escalate a crisis into a full-blown war and thereby undermine nuclear deterrence. On the other hand, we must also examine whether the perpetual arms race will ultimately lead to stability or exacerbate instability.. The ever-evolving contours of nuclear doctrines, driven by the rapid proliferation and innovation of both conventional and unconventional military capabilities, continue to complicate the region's challenges concerning crisis stability and arms race dynamics. India's inclination toward technological upgrades stems primarily from its endeavor to expand and acquire Western technologies, weapon systems, and platforms while maintaining its relations with Russia (Lalwani & Sagerstrom, 2023). The acquisition of advanced technologies changes the way countries approach offensive dominance, encouraging them to take preemptive and preventive measures rather than seeking negotiated

solutions. This disrupts the strategic balance and intensifies Pakistan's efforts to receive defense technologies, primarily with the help of China (Pant, 2012). The relative superiority and innovations in military technology, as compared to corresponding defensive capabilities, illustrate the likelihood of war and its effects on strategic stability in South Asia.

There is evidence to suggest that India's ability to respond to Pakistan's sub-conventional warfare has been significantly improved by the technological revolution and innovation. Nuclear doctrines have played a crucial role in maintaining strategic stability while also conveying power and force during this technological revolution. India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) acts as an idler gear, introducing TNWs (tactical nuclear weapons) into Pakistan's strategic calculus, further impacting strategic stability. Zafar Khan (2022) posits that the significant challenges to Pakistan's threat perception and strategic stability stem from India's advancements in nuclear technology and doctrinal revisions, resulting in profound shifts in the South Asian strategic landscape. States that prioritize innovation and advanced military technologies are more likely to adopt clear doctrines that emphasize offensive dominance, which can incentivize preventive and preemptive actions in an asymmetric conflict. On the other hand, Pakistan, which has limited resources and capabilities for innovation and technological acquisition, tends to adopt more ambiguous doctrines. It aims to use a combination of defensive and offensive strategies by considering various factors of national power, such as conventional and nuclear technologies, geographical considerations, alliances, and diplomatic arrangements, to assess an aggregate net balance.

India's adherence to its No First Use (NFU) and Counterforce Minimal Deterrence (CMD) nuclear posture, as a cornerstone of its nuclear doctrine, presents a significant challenge for any official abandonment. Despite persuasive arguments from various stakeholders, including individuals, organizations, and governments, domestic pressures exert a critical influence on Indian commentators, policymakers, and officials contemplating a departure from NFU and CMD. While the possibility of India renouncing its NFU policy cannot be ruled out entirely in the future, empirical evidence gathered through interviews suggests that Indian capabilities, both technological and organizational, are currently insufficient to support such a significant shift in nuclear strategy. Furthermore, the intermingling of civil and military targets in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan's geography, diminishes the effectiveness of any potential counterforce strategies. The February 2019 crisis underscored India's vulnerabilities and Pakistan's ability to maintain the status quo without resorting to unconventional means. Given these factors, Indian policymakers would find it impractical to believe in the feasibility of completely disarming India is currently focused on modernizing its military and strengthening its counterforce capabilities to maintain dominance, instead of launching a counterstrike against Pakistan using existing technologies. However, these efforts could contribute to the arms race instability, which may lead to crisis instability, and encourage Indian military planners to exploit Pakistan's weaknesses. This perpetuates a cycle of instability, validating the instability paradox inherent in the region's security dynamics.

Conclusion

The study shows that nuclear deterrence has prevented horizontal escalation in South Asia, but Indian focus on vertical escalation has been apparent in some crises. The advancements in military technology and changes in doctrinal approaches have made the strategic situation more complicated. India and Pakistan are both improving the sophistication and lethality of their air, land, and naval capabilities. Despite the nuclear

backdrop, India has signaled its willingness to engage in sub-conventional conflicts, as seen in the Indian Parliament Attack in 2012, the Uri Attack in 2016, and the Pulwama-Balakot Crisis in 2019. India claimed to have carried out surgical strikes on militant launch pads located on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control (LoC) in September 2016, which Pakistan denied. In February 2019, India launched missiles in an air raid on an alleged terror camp in Balakot district of Pakistan, and Pakistan retaliated by shooting down an Indian aircraft and capturing an Indian pilot. These events highlight the complex and delicate relationship between India and Pakistan, where regional stability depends on maintaining a credible nuclear deterrence and military balance. However, contestations over nuclear deterrence risk jeopardizing strategic stability in South Asia, potentially leading to a catastrophic nuclear confrontation. The recurrence of low-intensity conflicts despite nuclear deterrence, while ensuring stability, echoes Glenn Snyder's concept of the "stability-instability paradox." The study concludes that the persistence of a protracted conflict, coupled with issues such as terrorism, cross-border proxies, doctrinal shifts, frequent crises, and the looming threat of nuclear exchange, creates a volatile environment where strategic stability is constantly at risk.

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