

## Nuclear Doctrine and Deterrence Stability in South Asia

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**Abstract** *South Asia possesses strategic importance as home to two nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and is also of interest to global powers. The U.S. and the former USSR were interested in expanding their influence in South Asia. After the Cold War, the war against terrorism again drew the attention of the U.S. to conduct military operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan and India received worldwide attention when both developed nuclear capabilities in May 1998 after adopting the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Consequently, the Kashmir dispute emerged as a nuclear flashpoint. In this paper, an investigation is carried out involving the role of nuclear doctrine required to establish deterrence stability in post-nuclearization South Asia.*

**Key Words:**  
Nuclear, Doctrine,  
Deterrence, Stability,  
South Asia.

### Introduction

Pakistan and India's bilateral relationship increasingly depicts a syndrome of action-reaction cycles. Nuclear weapon states (NWS) harbour an enduring rivalry since 1947; they have fought three wars, i.e., in 1948, 1965, and 1971, and there is an ongoing dispute over Kashmir. Further, there was a limited war known as the Kargil War in 1999, a military standoff in 2001–02, and Indian claims of surgical strikes inside Pakistan after the Pulwama terrorist attack in 2019, which threatened to escalate the conflict. A simultaneous cause of tension lies in India's destabilising advancements in military technologies. Pakistan views this vertical proliferation as a strategic challenge to the stability of South Asia.

In 1998, India became an overt nuclear power coupled with conventional military superiority. The nuclear factor further destabilised the South Asian equation. In this situation, Pakistan had no option except to move toward nuclearisation. This was meant to maintain strategic regional security through the establishment of deterrence. However, the nuclear capability led to both conventional and nuclear arms races between the two states. The situation carried grave dangers for Pakistan, which experienced insecurity and the resultant security dilemma. After Pakistan conducted the nuclear tests, a situation of nuclear deterrence was created.

Currently, India is again destabilising the situation by pursuing a ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield and doctrinal shifts. The Indians claimed that at a lower orbit, the Indian interceptor now could target any moveable missiles (ballistic and cruise missiles). With this space militarisation, Pakistan's security dilemma would be exacerbated, and the cycle of action-reaction would breed insecurity in the region. The main reason behind bilateral insecurity is the condition of uncertainty about each other's intentions, known as the dilemma of interpretation.

Deterrence would be stable between India and Pakistan if both maintained strategic balance. The balance would remain stable if both states did not bring about any changes in the status quo. In the India-Pakistan case, the balance would be assumed to be stable as the two NWS did not experience confrontation between them or a direct nuclear attack by either side (Bahadur, 2006). In 1998 India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, which established mutual nuclear deterrence. The subsequent absence of conflict escalation provided evidence to prove the argument. In 1999, during the Kargil crisis, the NWS avoided nuclear war because nuclear deterrence worked. The Mumbai incident could also result in nuclear war but was prevented by deterrence stability (Javaid and Kamal, 2013). The Pulwama attack resulted in claims of surgical strikes but did not escalate beyond the conventional threshold (Singh and Amin, 2019).

The instability could occur if either India or Pakistan were ready to take risks to change the strategic balance and opt for escalation without fear of consequences (Feyyaz, 2019). Neither India nor Pakistan is sure that it could destroy the nuclear weapons of the other state in the first strike, especially after the introduction of submarines with second-strike capability. Whenever anyone of these states is assured of strategic superiority over the other one, the situation might result in instability. India-Pakistan nuclear deterrence is based upon mutual retaliatory capabilities. Both states

enjoy ambiguity about whether each can destroy all nuclear weapons of the other. Therefore, none is ready to attack first. Both states' missile ranges cover the entire territorial area of the other state.

The Indian nuclear doctrine ruled out the option of the first use of nuclear weapons. In contrast, Pakistan has kept open its first-use option intentionally because it was the best way to prevent Indian aggression. India's nuclear program and technological advancements mean the motive is to deter Pakistan and China, whereas the Pakistani nuclear program is only India-centric. Pakistan seeks to ensure credible deterrence. Pakistani nuclear strategy is actively reactive to the strategic posture of India.

However, the Indian anti-satellite weapon Shakti mission and other programmes can potentially upset the mutual deterrence relationship between India and Pakistan. They could also negate the basic requirement of deterrence stability. Consequently, Pakistan could take different measures independently or take the help of a third country like China. Moreover, India's Shakti programme, along with BMD, would increase its capability of a first strike. In this case, Pakistan's nuclear deterrence stability would be forced to rely on credible second-strike capability, wherein India would have to face severe damage.

The advancements in new technologies carry implications for South Asia's deterrence stability. With a history of conflict and peace, this region remains vulnerable to instability. The security dilemma experienced by Pakistan means that any technology and strategic advancement in India is viewed by Pakistan as a serious security threat and could initiate new arms races in the region. However, Indian perception is entirely different in this regard. It is believed that India needs to undertake some strategic advancements to attain parity with the superpower and great powers in the world.

The Pakistani nuclear tests on May 28, 1998, because of India's test two weeks before that, indicated the intention of Pakistan to establish regional stability in South Asia at the strategic level (Rani, 2007). Although stability was maintained through nuclear deterrence, it is continually challenged by India in its quest for the latest weapons. The main concern is how deterrence can be maintained after the introduction of advanced weapons? What are the implications of advanced weapons for nuclear doctrine in South Asia? What are the consequences of Indian actions in Kashmir on the region's strategic and deterrence stability?

The hypothesis of the study is that vertical proliferation and doctrinal shifts by India contain destabilising ramifications for South Asia. This study employed the descriptive method of research. The primary sources included statements, speeches of concerned persons, treaties, reports, documents, interviews, and official agreements, whereas secondary sources included books, journals, newspaper articles and websites. The approach of the study was exploratory and qualitative. Data was collected through secondary sources as follows: articles, documentation – a collection of information and data from existing reports and documents, newspapers - used to understand the state's position and situation, prime minister's and ministers' statements, and the official/organisational websites of India and Pakistan.

### **The Concept of Deterrence Stability**

Thomas Schelling stated that deterrence stability was the important key that prevented nuclear war in the Cold War era (Schelling, 1962). Deterrence stability is a theoretical concept. The Cambridge Dictionary defines stability as a situation in which nothing is likely to change or move, especially indicating political stability. It assumes a strategic balance between two rival states. In the context of the Cold War, many analysts assumed peace as strategic stability and war as instability. According to these analysts, there were only two indicators to check stability: war and peace. John Mearsheimer defined stability as the "absence of war and major crisis". In this definition, there were only two indicators of instability: war and major crisis and neglected all other important elements such as arms races, the role of alliances, and technological advancement.

The theory of deterrence has been credited with the prevention of an outbreak of nuclear war between superpowers in the twentieth century. Deterrence had undergirded the basic relational structure between U.S.-USSR, providing baseline information on state security policies, e.g. nuclear doctrine. For effective implementation, the deterrence theory contains certain assumptions; firstly, all states are relational actors that calculate cost and benefit before initiation of any conflict. Secondly, deterrence is always operative among states. Thirdly, in the rivalry among states, there is always the possibility of war, and state leaders believe that the enemy can easily carry out a threat that they have committed. The theory also assumes that various types or classes of weapons are on different pedestals. The policies and threats are developed against certain categories of weapons. Still, when these are not clearly defined, this leads to instability because it is difficult to interpret the adversary's signals.

Strategic stability relies on the equitable level of weapons, security equilibrium, and mutual vulnerability among states. The basic premise is that no state would militarise to seek an advantage over the other state. Strategic stability incorporates many mutually overlapping ideas such as crisis stability, deterrence stability,

escalation control stability, nuclear stability, and arms race stability. New technological developments could become the cause of arms races between states, and gaps could underscore strategic instability between nuclear states. The concept of deterrence evaluates the status of strategic stability between two NWS in the quest for the latest technologies. Situational (SWOT) analysis can be employed as a tool to examine the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threat-related to the latest anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) technology demonstrated by India (DeFrieze, 2014).

Security dilemma refers to a cascade of insecurity (Roe, 1999). It indicates a situation where states are taking actions to improve their military capabilities internally and seeking allies externally. When one side increases its offence-defence weapon systems, in response, the other side feels insecure. Whenever one state accumulates power, it jeopardises the other state's security. This leads the other state to take similar measures, and it generates tension that becomes the reason for conflicts.

The dilemma occurs because survival is the most vital task for all states, and all states try to overcome each other as a security measure. The arms races ensue among states, and no one feels secure. All states feel insecure because they are constantly trying to secure themselves from others and find themselves in competition. John H. Herz (1950) used the term "Security Dilemma" in "Political Realism and Political Idealism." Herbert Butterfield termed this situation of the states as an "absolute predicament." Herz stated that it is a structural notion, and states rely on self-help to meet their security needs. This (un)intentionally becomes the reason for creating insecurity among other states. Each state interprets its own security needs, which are measured as a potential threat by other states.

Kenneth Waltz declared that the international system was anarchic in nature. There was no check or authority above the sovereign states, which could enforce laws on states or resolve disputes among them. There was no way to offer transparency. This is considered the core concept of defensive realism. In an anarchical international system, survival remains the most important task for states. No state has an idea about the intention of the other states, so states perpetually try to improve their security. This generates a security dilemma. Waltz stated that because of the international anarchical system, weak states feel threatened by rival states. For fear of any offensive action by rival states, they form alliances with strong states to ensure their survival.

### **Deterrence Stability During the Cold War**

During the Cold War, the superpowers U.S. and the former Soviet Union expended large budgets to develop new armaments and military technologies. For instance, the space arms race was initiated between the two states in 1957 with the development of a Soviet artificial satellite named Sputnik 1. By the end of the 1960s, both states were regularly deploying satellites for military, communication, and commercial purposes. In treaties signed for arms control, spy satellites were used to monitor the dismantling of military assets, referred to as "national technical means of verification".

Both superpowers, the U.S. and USSR, developed ballistic missiles as the means to deliver nuclear weapons. Both powers increased the range of their missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), which were frequently tested in space for their targeting capacity. The ballistic missiles were usually launched into sub-orbital spaceflight to cover large distances. During the Cold War, both superpowers avoided space weaponisation. But it was predictable that the technological advancement of many states might make it inevitable, and space would ultimately be weaponised (DeFrieze, 2014). There are myriad treaties placing limitations on space military activities, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Limited Test Ban Treaty, Outer Space Treaty, and a draft resolution proposed by Russia and China in the U.N. on Prevention of Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS).

### **India's Nuclear Doctrine**

In 1999, India proposed its draft nuclear doctrine at the end of the Kargil war. This draft had principles of development, deployment, and employment of Indian nuclear forces. It included credible minimum deterrence and punitive retaliation in case of attack. It possessed capability at the triad level: aircraft, naval- and land-based. Enhancement was done by a combination of multiple redundant systems, dispersion, mobility, and deception (Chaudhry, 2009).

On Jan 4, 2003, the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) released the official Indian nuclear doctrine. The main aim of the Indian nuclear doctrine was a No-First-Use posture. It aimed at maintaining minimum credible deterrence. According to the doctrine, if India was attacked with nuclear weapons, then India would retaliate massively, seeking second-strike capability. There would be strict control over the export of nuclear and missile technology and materials. It asserted that nuclear weapons could not only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory but also on Indian forces anywhere in the world. Moreover,

retaliation with nuclear weapons would be an option if major attacks against India or Indian forces are carried out with biological and/or chemical weapons. India wants to adopt a policy of flexible response in a crisis.

On Aug 5, 2019, India abolished articles 35A and 370 from its constitution, which gave autonomy to the disputed Muslim majority region of Kashmir. Article 35A was permanent resident law, which meant none other than a Kashmiri could purchase a piece of land or become a permanent resident of Kashmir. Article 370 allowed Indian-administered Kashmir jurisdiction to propose and implement its own laws at every level, except finance, defence, foreign affairs, and communications.

There were two implications of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) decision to abolish Articles 35A and 370: First, the BJP gained a political advantage from the action in Kashmir and anti-minorities policies in other parts of India. Second, India could now highlight the issue of Kashmir as an "internal" matter of India in response to efforts by any third-party intervention. Right after these changes in the Indian constitution, Kashmir was placed under curfew, which is yet to be lifted. There are ongoing killings of innocent people in Kashmir by Indian forces. Communication lines were cut-off between Kashmir and the rest of the world. People starve for want of food in their houses.

Pakistan contacted the United Nations (UN) and the U.S. for assistance and for convincing India to reverse its decision to revocation of the special status of Kashmir. Finally, the UN Security Council scheduled a session over Kashmir, where China-backed Pakistan. However, the United Nations, as well as the U.S., communicated that India and Pakistan must solve this problem bilaterally, as per Simla Accord.

On Aug 16, 2019, the Indian defence minister issued a statement that shocked the South Asian region. Indian minister Mr Rajnath Singh was speaking at an event on the death anniversary of Atal Bihari Vajpayee at Pokhran. He mentioned that India had a policy of No-First-Use from the beginning, but what happens afterwards depends on the situation. That was a clear view from an Indian policymaker about the shift of the nuclear doctrine of India from No-First-Use to First-Use.

First, it was thought that the threat of changing India's No-First-Use posture was just a slip of the tongue, but later, he tweeted that:

"Pokhran is the area which witnessed Atal Ji's firm resolve to make India a nuclear power and yet remain firmly committed to the doctrine of 'No First Use'. India has strictly adhered to this doctrine. What happens in future depends on the circumstances."

This statement on his official page on Twitter confirmed to the world that India could opt for a preemptive strike. This statement obviously drew the attention of Pakistani officials.

### **Implications for Regional Deterrence Stability**

Modi government's policy of revocation of the special status of Kashmir would lead to more violence. For instance, the death of Burhan Wani in 2019 resulted in huge Kashmiri protests. Until the reversal of the changes in the special status of Kashmir, Pakistan and India would face each other at the borders, either in small border skirmishes on a daily basis or proxy wars or large confrontations.

The statement by the Indian defence minister shows that India can opt for a first strike or a preemptive strike and can change its official nuclear doctrine. This is disturbing not only for the region but for the world too. India seeks regional hegemony, and that is only possible if it can dominate Pakistan. All other states in the region are either dependent on India for their trade routes or do not possess nuclear weapons capability. A major reason behind the outbreak of a major war is the nature and type of leadership. Mr Narendra Modi is perceived as aggressive, extremist, and anti-Muslim. If this kind of leadership is coupled with changes in nuclear doctrine, the war might be the ultimate result, with widespread destruction in the region and beyond (Joshi and O'Donnel, 2018).

Regional deterrence stability is at stake if India officially shifts its nuclear doctrine from No-First-Use to First-Use. There was no reaction from any of the great powers to the Indian minister's aggressive statement. Clearly, the great powers and the U.N. expressed helplessness and requested both countries to resolve their matters bilaterally. This is a non-starter because India is inimical to talks on Kashmir. War would affect both economies badly. These countries are located at the coast of the Indian Ocean, and in case of nuclear detonations, there might be earthquakes daily, and a huge tsunami could destroy every country in the region.

A nuclear war between these countries would be termed the Third World War, which would be a failure of the UN. Many great powers have invested in this region. If the regional countries got into a conflict, that would affect the great powers too. To save great power interests, they would fight on the side where their interests lie. It might be possible that both countries become colonies again, where both are deprived of sovereignty, independence, and integrity.

A general war between India and Pakistan, even on a limited scale, should be avoided (Chari, 2000). Pakistan and India must engage in serious talks, where both countries can negotiate for the betterment of the region. Both countries need not cross the nuclear threshold and should try to maintain conventional equilibrium with one another.

India should refrain from making irresponsible and threatening statements to prevent the escalation of crises (Sood, 2014). Any Indian offensive movement or deployment, either conventional or nuclear, would result in nuclear devastation for both countries, as Prime Minister Mr Imran Khan and Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, mentioned in their statements. India might be wrong to think that with its numerical superiority in conventional forces, it could overpower Pakistan.

Pakistan has demonstrated that it neutralised the numerical military advantage of India. India should ponder over the unofficial nuclear doctrine of Pakistan, which asserts that the possibility of First Use is there, even in a conventional war. If Pakistan's threat perceptions are raised, then Pakistan might go for first use, and the consequences could be harsh. India should avoid issuing irresponsible statements because such statements can result in a nuclear war in a volatile region of the world (Sankaram, 2014).

Both countries should work on non-traditional security threats and improve their internal conditions, like health (COVID-19), climate change, poverty, terrorism, unemployment, population, clean water, food security, etc. (Schweers, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Deterrence stability includes factors that prevent war, political instability, and arms race instability. Stability can be divided into two components: arms race stability and crisis stability. Zafar Iqbal Cheema (2010) stated that in a situation of crisis, stability would be robust, whereas arms race stability means the pattern of an arms race in both quantitative and qualitative terms does not undermine stability. According to Dr Rifaat Hussain (2005), Scott D. Sagan, and J. H. Kahn, deterrence stability is affected by major changes in any of the following elements. First, there is the absence of incentive to launch a nuclear first strike in any crisis. Secondly, there is the absence of quantitative and qualitative expansion of the nuclear arsenal of the state. Thirdly, any changes in state behaviour upon perceiving a threat of force. Fourthly, nuclear weapons must not be used accidentally, and there should not be any unauthorised use.

South Asia's security will be threatened if Pakistan and India are involved in a war, either limited or total. Following realism theory, India and Pakistan are not in any condition to fight a nuclear war. Being realists, they both must think of the aftermath of the war in the context of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Pakistan-India rivalry cannot be stopped in the near future, but they should act as responsible and rational states. Irresponsible statements, behaviours, and threats, particularly nuclear threats, must be avoided. Kashmir is the bone of contention between the two countries. India's hostility is pushing Pakistan into a corner. The concept of mutually assured destruction does not allow both countries to opt for war. But if the great powers do not intervene in the event of a crisis, and the leadership on both sides exhibits aggressive behaviour, then the cost of hostility could become unbearable for the region and the world.

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