

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

The Cold War was largely defined by the use of Nuclear weapons as a means of mutual deterrence which kept two blocks from full-scale conventional war. In a sense, the nuclear weapons provided the specter of Mutually Assured Deterrence (MAD) as a means of deterrence, it was these mechanisms of arms limitation and confidence-building that brought stability to the deterrence and controlled unfettered proliferation.

The unique character of the South Asian Nuclear weapons triad, establishes the terms of stability of nuclear deterrence in the South Asian region and examines mechanisms to enhance the nuclear deterrence stability in the region. An assessment of the review of literature on the subject brings out that the difference between the Cold War and the Second Nuclear Age and the lack of control mechanisms have been examined to some degree since the turn of the century.

Keywords

Nuclear, Deterrence, Stability, Cold War, Mutually Assured Deterrence, Capability, Credibility, Conventional Superiority.

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Introduction

Nuclear deterrence is an important topic of discussion in the field of security studies in the last over more than seven decades ever since the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union became a nuclear power. However, in the context of South Asia, the question of nuclear deterrence arises since the two South Asian rivals became a nuclear power capability in May 1998. The deterrence stability in South Asia has been under stress over the past few years owing to an exponential increase in India's military build-up and defense procurement.¹

Nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia becomes very much relevant when the relationship between India and Pakistan over the last more than five decades has been and continues to remain characterized by severe crises at irregular intervals.² Both countries had already possessed sufficient nuclear weapons to ensure a robust, largely stable mutual nuclear deterrence. India and Pakistan are seeking new technologies and capabilities that dangerously undermine each other's defense under the nuclear threshold. Whatever they learn from past crises, the uncharted territory they are now exploring requires enlightened judgment about their doctrines, their nuclear and conventional capabilities, and their unpredictable implications in future crises.

The present paper will make a critical analysis of the nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia. Despite differences in the scale and circumstances of these nuclear competitions, both pairings have in common an interactive strategic competition compounded by conventional force imbalances and contentious issues that could lead to conflict. The paper argues that deterrence stability between two nuclear-armed adversaries such as India and Pakistan or it can be China and Pakistan is a mirage. Instead, deterrence stability has proven feasible only when nuclear-armed states have little or nothing to fight about, when they address their security concerns through diplomatic means, when they agree to set them aside, or when one of the rivals collapses.

Conceptualizing Nuclear Deterrence

Nuclear deterrence as a concept or an intellectual construct emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Deterrence is the power to prevent, discourage, or dissuade a potential adversary from taking a particular course of action. Deterrence is actually a product of capability and credibility.

$$\text{Deterrence} = \text{Capability} \times \text{Credibility}$$

Nuclear deterrence will continue to rely heavily on the credibility of a state's retaliation. While credibility will depend on both capability and intention; but capability

refers to nuclear weapons hardware and their command and control systems. The intention is a complex psychological phenomenon.³

The concept of nuclear deterrence is expanded to include threats to use nuclear weapons to deter other sorts of military action. Nuclear Deterrence is a military doctrine according to which the possibility that a country will use the nuclear weapons it possesses in retaliation will deter an enemy from attacking. It is a strategy of nations possessing significant nuclear arsenals for deterring military actions, particularly the initiation of nuclear war, on the part of other nations. Basically, nuclear deterrence is a strategy of promising to retaliate against another nation for some military action with the use of nuclear weapons.⁴ Therefore, nuclear deterrence follows the rationale of the 'first user' principle. States reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in self-defense against an armed attack threatening their vital security interests. Possession of nuclear weapons could be seen as the ultimate bargaining tool in international diplomacy, instantly giving any nuclear state a seat at the top table.

The doctrine of nuclear deterrence is based on the underlying philosophy that Nuclear weapons are so destructive that no country would use them, because such use would cause massive humanitarian crises and no political leader would be willing to risk the possible death of millions of their citizens. The threat of being overpowered or having mutually-assured destruction is enough to prevent the world's superpowers from escalating a conflict to the point that a military confrontation becomes necessary. Deterrence enthusiasts claim that nuclear weapons do not just protect countries against the use of nuclear weapons by others, but even prevent war and promote stability. Kenneth Waltz has argued the logic behind nuclear deterrence in a way that,

"Although we are defenseless, if you attack we will punish you to an extent that more than cancels your gains."⁵

Thus, nuclear deterrence helps avoid a nuclear war as each side tries to secure their interests by avoiding a nuclear confrontation. Deterrence requires all parties involved to maintain the right balance between threat and reassurance.

India's Growing Conventional Superiority and Pakistan's Nuclear Capability

India continues to develop offensive conventional military options to respond to future terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan, but these options do not mesh well with India's restrained nuclear doctrine and arsenal.

The rationale behind Pakistan's nuclear weapon program is clear India centric. Islamabad sought to overcome the conventional military superiority of India which they consider to be a threat to their security. Pakistan's nuclear development came

to the light in January 1972, when Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto announced a plan to develop nuclear arms at a meeting with Pakistan's top scientists at Multan.⁶ Besides, Pakistan's defeat in the hand of India in the 1971 War and India's proven conventional military superiority over Pakistan were the main reasons for Pakistan's decision to go nuclear. Pakistan's nuclearisation has been aimed at managing the Indian threat by matching India's nuclear capability. How much Pakistan is committed to Nuclear weapons capability can be reflected from the statement made by former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he said that Pakistan will "eat grass" if necessary to stay at par with Indian nuclear capability demonstrate the depth of insecurity in the nation.

India's decision to go for a nuclear weapons program has nothing to do with the threat from Pakistan. Regional and global developments were the crucial factors that India influenced India to move in the decision of nuclear weapons program, leading to the conduct of what is being termed as a "peaceful" nuclear test in 1974. The defeat in the hand of China in 1962 and China's first nuclear-weapon test in 1964, and the perceived intrusion of the United States and the Soviet Union on India's autonomy during the 1971 war with Pakistan.

Pakistan's nuclear-weapon program, meanwhile, was initiated following the ignominious loss of the eastern half of the country in the 1971 war with India. The sense of existential threat and insecurity since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, compounded by the subsequent bifurcation of Pakistan that produced Bangladesh in 1971, clearly helped motivate Pakistan to develop the bomb. For Pakistani politicians and military officers, nuclear weapons became a way to deter future conventional war with India that might threaten further territorial losses or even the survival of the state. Pakistan opted to pursue its nuclear-weapon efforts quietly, drawing on clandestine procurement of foreign technologies and equipment, and it was aided on several occasions by China.⁷

The 1998 nuclear tests not only brought the nuclear situation in South Asia more into the open but also forced India and Pakistan to grapple with the need to formulate and enunciate policies on nuclear deterrence that would reassure the international community that both states would be responsible stewards of nuclear weapons and materials.⁸

For nuclear deterrence and large-scale clash avoidance, a protected second-strike capability offers its services. An enemy can be easily dissuaded from his devious designs if its opponent is equipped with a nuclear arsenal that can be preserved even after a nuclear attack, and then the possibility that that arsenal will be used to strike back in opposition to hostility. Deterrence stability is thus improved because

states are discouraged to use their nuclear weapons first in a conflict, because of the fear that their attack will only provoke a nuclear second strike.

If a country faces a nuclear attack, it is obvious that the storage or bases, where the enemy presumes its nuclear arsenal is stockpiled, are targeted; to protect themselves against a retaliatory nuclear strike. But, if a country has sufficient nuclear weapons, and their survivability is assured through the way they are deployed, so they may be used as retribution, then that country has a Second Strike capability.

And, for that purpose, the weapons that assure a Second Strike Capability are usually missiles that are either fired from movable land-based launch pads or from nuclear-powered submarines. The continuously moving land-based launchers are difficult to pin down and target and similarly the submarines which remain underwater for considerable lengths of time are even more challenging to detect and damage.

A Second Strike rebuttal would obviously aim for densely populated metropolises or other developed structures i.e. counter-value targets, on its adversaries land. Thus if even only a very limited amount of nuclear arsenal remains, even then can a Second strike become a source of collateral damage and demolition. The indication of being hit with that limited, remaining amount of nuclear arsenal that managed to survive, dissuades the enemy from even considering hostility.

In order for Pakistan's nuclear posture to be a success and act as an able deterrent, Pakistan needs to sustain the deterrence of its First Strike Nuclear Capability. The sustainability part would only arise from not only a credible but an assured Second Strike Nuclear Capability. The First strike serves to deter India from using its conventional military superiority from harming Pakistan and the Second strike adds to the value of the First strike. An assured Second Strike would reinforce Pakistan's need of deterring India from using conventional military might against Pakistan to harm its national interest or national security.

India-Pakistan Nuclear Deterrence Stability

Nuclear deterrence stability between Pakistan and India is challenging because of asymmetries of power, close proximity, a record of misreading each other's intentions, and a history of war and crises. The rivalry between India and Pakistan has been endemic, resulting in wars, proxy wars, border clashes, and crises. Pakistan has devoted significant national, technological, and scientific resources to achieve security equilibrium with India and to deter India from taking aggressive actions. This strategic competition has had destabilizing effects on Pakistan, straining its resources and heightening internal security dilemmas. The conventional military imbalance with India is growing, leaving two options to reinforce an offensive defense

posture. One — reliance on sub-conventional warfare — has proven to do more harm than good for Pakistan. The other — strengthening nuclear deterrence — will remain a big challenge for Pakistan.

Owing to its small size and weak economy, Islamabad finds itself unable to match India's conventional military arms build-up. Pakistan developed its nuclear weapons capability as a balancer to counter the Indian threat. Pakistan has a first-strike capability, however, a first-strike capability has its strategic disadvantages due to which it must be backed up with a second-strike capability. Nuclear second-strike capability is the ability of a nation to absorb a nuclear strike and still attack its adversary with sufficient power. This capability deters the adversary from striking in the first place. The key ingredient of any second-strike capability is the ability of a nation to shield its second strike 'platform' from a nuclear strike.⁹

Nuclear deterrence works — until it fails. On the subcontinent, it could fail catastrophically if India's leaders miscalculated and if Pakistan's nuclear bluff was called. Nor is the balancing of the weapon system by weapon system an affordable option for Pakistan. The widening gap in conventional capabilities will call into question the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear posture, since the first use of nuclear weapons will pose an existential threat to both combatants. Pakistan will be placed in an untenable position if it uses nuclear weapons first in a military confrontation triggered by sub-conventional warfare against India.

Pakistan's nuclear posture of offensive defense poses serious problems of deterrence stability. The integration of tactical or short-range nuclear-capable delivery systems into a conventional defense of Pakistan adds serious problems of horizontal and vertical escalation. The probability that Pakistan will use nuclear weapons is commensurate to the size of a concentrated Indian armed attack against vital territorial space. The loss of command and control, the risks of unauthorized use, and the probability of accidents grow as nuclear weapons are situated closer to combatants.¹⁰

Pakistan had a firm belief that it will need to further develop nuclear weapon-armed submarines for the assured second-strike capability, but also that the acquisition of this capability is mandatory for maintaining the deterrence stability and subsequent peace in the region.

Reducing Risks for Use of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia

Given the trouble security situation that remains in South Asia, it is imperative to introduce transitional measures to reduce the nuclear risks while seeking a path to nuclear disarmament. In this regard, an important set of proposals for nuclear risk reduction measures between India and Pakistan was released by the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND) in Delhi on 18 June 2002.

Following steps need to be undertaken at the level of nuclear diplomacy, education, policy and doctrine to reduce the future nuclear risks between the two South Asian rivals:

1. Holding nuclear risk reduction dialogues on regular basis- Such dialogues need to be completely separated from the Kashmir issue, a point of view that Pakistan must be brought around to. Shared understandings are vital to underpin nuclear crisis management by adversaries.

2. Develop a mutual understanding that neither of two sides will target and destroy the leadership of the other and to keep nuclear weapons command centers from urban centers - Attacking political and military leadership to destroy nuclear command and control is likely to be a strong incentive in early use of nuclear weapons. And nuclear command centers should not only be far from civilian populations but also from nuclear weapons storage or deployment sites.

3. Declare a policy of not targeting cities - Nothing can ever justify the deliberate targeting of a civilian population, especially with a nuclear weapon. The population densities of the mega-cities of India and Pakistan ensure that any nuclear attack would lead to hundreds of thousands of immediate fatalities. It should be avoided at all costs.¹¹

4. Nuclear CBMs need to be strengthened - both countries could consider Nuclear Confidence Building Centers (NCBCs) on the models of Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers (NRRCs) which were established between the US and the former Soviet Union.¹²

Conclusion

Nuclear Deterrence between the two South Asian rivals is becoming less stable and unpredictable with the passage of time and an increase in nuclear weapon capabilities. As such, India and Pakistan have not addressed basic issues in dispute, nor have they agreed to set them aside. Deterrence stability will only be sustainable if a substantive political discourse is seen as making headway towards the solution of critical political issues that divide the two countries. Deterrence stability between Pakistan and India is challenging because of asymmetries of power, close proximity, a record of misreading each other's intentions, and a history of war and crises. Deterrence stability is even harder to achieve because of the key elements of Pakistan's strategic culture.

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