

Nuclear Myths and Political Realities in South Asia

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Introduction

Analyses of South Asian nuclearism take two polar positions in explicating the effects of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent. The first argues that their advent has made for a more stable South Asia, circumscribing armed conflicts and terminating major wars by the logic of deterrence. The second claims that nuclear proliferation has destabilized both Indo-Pakistani relations, in particular, and South Asian security, in general, by encouraging aggressive Pakistani military postures and massive conventional build-ups on either side of the Line of Control. This paper weighs the merits of either case by considering the turn to nuclearism by India and Pakistan, followed by the ‘stability/instability’ debate.

The Nuclear Turn

India’s nuclear weapons tests of 1998 constituted a significant break from the past, but the contours of international and South Asian security had changed dramatically since the PNE of 1974. While India’s foreign policy in general betrayed a more realist orientation (Ganguly 2004), the shift from the *concept* of a credible minimum deterrent to its implementation as *strategy* was necessitated by the turbulent waters of the post -Cold War world, in which South Asia remained “the most dangerous, unstable, and anarchic part of the world” (Karnad 2008: 5, 35-106; Tellis 2001: 9-116). The proliferation of nuclear weapons to South Asia put a spanner in the works of the ‘nuclear taboo’ (Tannenwald 2007: 379-380). But, there was little doubt that weapons technology already existed in the subcontinent, especially given India’s prior experiments, clandestine Chinese nuclear facilitation for Pakistan (Dixit 2002: 333), and India’s great power aspirations (see: Cohen 2001: 157-197; Tellis 2003).

This explosion of the nuclear myths of South Asia (see: Perkovich 2002: 444-468) resulted in a renewed interest for IR theory – especially that of nuclear deterrence – in the subcontinent, with the two immediate fears of the stability of the deterrent balance between India and Pakistan and the security of weapons, facilities, and materials (Quinlan 2009: 139-141). While India was purported to have taken the nuclear turn in order to ascend higher in the echelons of world politics and balance an apparent nuclear threat from China, for Pakistan it was the only deterrent to India’s overwhelming conventional threat (Cirincione 2007: 53, 61). Kenneth Waltz, of course, reasoned that much like the erstwhile Soviet Union and China – two contiguous nuclear states – Indo-Pakistani relations would find relative stability amidst contestation, given the geographical proximity and destructive capacities of the newly-acquired weapons systems (Sagan & Waltz 2003: 12, 37).

The aftermath of the tests saw India adumbrate a ‘no-first-use’ policy, emphasizing a ‘second-strike’ capability to achieve a minimum credible deterrent. Pakistan articulated its nuclear stance *vis-à-vis* India, its primary concern being a ‘first-use’ policy to deter conventional aggression. However, “Pakistani supply of nuclear materials to other countries and terrorist groups that are more likely to use nuclear weapons” (Paul 2009: 124) indirectly challenges the tradition of the non-use of nuclear weapons, and upsets the assurance of Waltz’s position.

Stability or Instability?

Nuclear proliferation to the subcontinent, according to Rajesh Basrur, has led to “South Asia’s Cold War” (2008), ideationally rooted in collective memory and materially underpinned by the dynamics of power politics in the region. Here, nuclear deterrence works in a minimalistic way, while conventional wars between nuclear rivals are unviable and remain contained to a rational limit (Basrur 2008: 103, 104). This is precisely how Waltz explains the Kargil conflict of 1999 between India and Pakistan: “Kargil showed once again that deterrence does not firmly protect disputed areas but does limit the extent of the violence” (Sagan & Waltz 2003: 115). Others, like Krepon and Chari (Cirincione 2007: 100-101), opine that such resolutions of conflict are inconclusive and both sides entertain the idea of strategic gains below the nuclear threshold. Carranza (2009) argues that nuclear weapons play only a marginal role in Indo-Pak security and the imperative is to curb proliferation in the region through a robust institutional framework.

Post-1998, South Asia has seen escalating levels of deterrence and an expanding conventional threshold, the effects of a geographical proximate nuclear dyad. Nuclear weapons may have limited the risks of war, but they do not inhibit either side from engaging in low-level conflicts (Chari, Cheema, & Cohen 2003: 135). Indeed, a combination of Pakistani boldness and Indian restraint since 1998 has surprised proponents of the stability/instability paradox. A small probability of lower-level conflict escalating to the nuclear threshold would not encourage such behaviour, yet Pakistani forces have repeatedly launched conventional attacks on Indian territory (Kapur 2005: 129). India has been a “reluctant” nuclear power (Cohen & Dasgupta 2010: 97-122) and the development of the ‘Cold Start’ doctrine (see: Ladwig 2007) shows that the Indian military establishment has also warmed up to the idea of limited wars under the nuclear umbrella. Moreover, Kargil and other skirmishes along the Indo-Pak border – and the massive face-off in 2002 – bear testimony to the fact that “violence in various forms remains a legitimate [means] to achieve Pakistan’s political objectives in Kashmir” (Tellis, Fair, & Medby 2001: 7).

Any hopes of an “extended period of nuclear stability” (Talbot 2004: 95) after 1998 soon dissipated as Pakistan embroiled India in the Kargil conflict. But, it remains unclear if a full-scale conventional war was avoided because of the nuclear threshold or other pressing strategic concerns. Neither India nor Pakistan possesses the conventional means for achieving a quick and conclusive victory, while protracted conflicts are costly for both sides. In addition, internecine sub-conventional wars may carry on indefinitely, and it is improbable that any international intervention in the same shall be forthcoming. With Pakistani politics spiralling out of control over the last couple of years, the bigger threat to South Asian security is the transfer of nuclear weapons (or their technologies) to terrorist organizations rather than nuclear war between these long-standing adversaries. The role of deterrence, therefore, is at this point *overdetermined*.

Conclusion

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia may neither be highly problematic to conceive, nor might its breakdown signify absolute war; nuclear weapons could even purport to offer their possessors in this case the promise of security at a reasonable cost. However, this security

does not necessarily connote peace, or an external operational environment devoid of turbulence. The logic of deterrence no doubt holds in South Asia, but the same does not obviate conventional conflicts.

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