

NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN INDIA-PAKISTAN CRISIS

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Abstract

Nuclear weapons have proved their deterrence worth in South Asia. There has been no full scale conventional war between India and Pakistan since their appearance on the scene. In the face of Pakistan's present economic and diplomatic challenges they have given the country's defence its needed confidence and capability that the old adversary fully appreciates. The balance of terror has in fact reinforced the security of the region. US mediation did lend a helping hand in defusing crises in the past but what has been more critical is the realization in the subcontinent of the dangerous consequences of escalation. Pakistan's credible nuclear capability has helped make Indian choices of de-escalation easier.

Key Words: Nuclear Weapons, India, Pakistan, Crisis.

Nuclear Weapons in Pakistan's Security before 1998

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia from 1986-1998, was an era of "non-weaponized deterrence."¹ During this era both sides' nuclear postures were formally denied to outside powers but communicated on purpose, though informally, to the regional antagonist. Weapons and warheads through this formative phase were either not fully assembled or not mated with delivery systems, even though possibilities were devised for employment of nuclear weapons in crisis and conflict-situations if each side perceived to be facing a threat which could not be controlled with conventional military capability. Threatening postures were occasionally adopted but were ambiguous enough to be modified or withdrawn if the need arose.²

Pakistan kept its nuclear capability ambiguous by relying on existential deterrence during the late 1980s to 1998. Pakistan adopted a posture suited to

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¹ George Perkovich, "Non-Weaponized Deterrence: The Case for Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* (Winter 1994).

² Zafar Iqbal Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development, and Implications for South Asian* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 395.

its capability to assemble nuclear devices to directly deter a full scale conventional attack by India.

Before the 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, two crises arose with serious war alarms: the 1986-87 Brasstacks crisis and the 1990 Kashmir compound crisis. Pakistan during both these crises was still on the road to acquiring a nuclear weapons capability and it did not have a clear nuclear posture.

The 1986–87 Brasstacks Crisis

Brasstacks was a massive military exercise carried out by India with live-fire involving almost 250,000 troops—as well as mobile RAPID divisions.³ The exercise's closeness to Sindh, troubled Pakistan, since a deep Indian drive there could separate the links between North and South Pakistan.⁴ In reaction to such a massive Indian troop movement, in January 1987 Pakistan moved its two strike corps, I and II Corps, down the border, organizing them for a probable pincer move against India's northern and southern Punjab.

The crisis escalated on January 23, when India positioned defensive deployments in Punjab with Operation Trident to wedge a possible Pakistani offensive and began making noises about preventive military strikes, mainly on Pakistan's Kahuta nuclear facility.⁵ The Zia regime (1977-88) dreaded aggressive plans by India, and the dilemma which a war on two fronts would create: one with India in the east, and the other with Soviet or Afghan forces in the west.

To deal with the dilemma of a two-front war, the Zia regime relied on diplomacy, conventional force posture, and nuclear weapons capability. Pakistan restricted escalation of the Afghan insurgency into a war on the western front with diplomatic support and strategic backing from the US.⁶ To defuse the Brasstacks crisis, Pakistan relied upon its nuclear weapons capability, this being the first time in the history of the Subcontinent. The channels Pakistan employed in signalling an incipient deterrent capability, however, were unconventional and indirect.⁷

In an interview, on January 28, 1987, with journalist Kuldip Nayyar for the *London Times*, Dr Abdul Qadeer (A.Q.) Khan, who headed the Kahuta facility, threatened, "Nobody can undo Pakistan or take us for granted. ...[L]et

³ P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process: American Engagement in South Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁵ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 403.

it be clear that we shall use the bomb if our existence is threatened.”⁸ Dr A.Q. Khan’s deliberate acknowledgement about Pakistan possessing nuclear weapons had an impact on the then US administration. US concerns were nurtured by the fact that Pakistan would cross certain redlines. At this point the US made diplomatic efforts to defuse the tension. US Ambassador John Gunther Dean made rigorous efforts in New Delhi to speed up the defusing of the crisis.⁹

The 1990 Crisis

The two countries again came close to the possibility of a nuclear encounter in May 1990. The Kashmir dispute had once again brought India and Pakistan face to face with a full scale war. The Kashmiri indigenous struggle for independence from India was being accredited to Pakistani support. India accused Pakistan of supporting the struggle in Kashmir by arming, training, and infiltrating Mujahideens (freedom fighters). India deployed its strike corps along the border near Rajasthan in the south while taking up defensive positions in the north. Indian Prime Minister, V.P. Singh warned that Pakistan could not get away with taking Kashmir without a war.¹⁰

Pakistan positioned its II Corps on Punjab’s southern border with Rajasthan and placed its I Corps across Punjab’s northern border with Kashmir. Pakistan also carried out its largest-ever military exercise, which tested a new “offensive defense doctrine” that was planned “to take the war into India, launching a sizeable offensive on Indian territory,” according to former Pakistani Chief of Staff Gen. Aslam Beg.¹¹ Reportedly Pakistan also maneuvered its incipient nuclear weapons capability in case of a full scale war with India. According to a report by James Adams in the *Sunday Times*, London: “American spy satellites photographed heavily armed convoys leaving the top-secret Pakistani nuclear weapons complex at Kahuta, near Islamabad and heading for military airfields.”¹²

By late March 1990 with thousands of forces arrayed against each other across the Kashmir Line of Control (LoC) and the international border, the 1990 crisis seemed to be heading towards armed conflict between two nuclear

⁸ Kanti P. Bajpai et al., *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crisis in South Asia* (Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 39.

⁹ Vipin Narang, “Posturing for Peace? Pakistan’s Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability,” *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009/10): 52.

¹⁰ This was reported by Seymour Hersh quoted in Zafar Iqbal Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence*. Seymour Hersh, “On the Nuclear Edge,” *The New Yorker*, March 29, 1993, 62-65.

¹¹ Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 91.

¹² James Adams, “Pakistan ‘Nuclear War Threat’,” *Sunday Times*, May 27, 1990. Quoted in Zafar Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence*.

capable states. Even though both the Indian and Pakistani armies were cautious not to shift their strike corps elements too near to the border, political leaders in both countries continued to escalate their war of words.¹³

At the end of May 1990 the US sent off its Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates to the South Asian region to de-escalate the persisting crisis between India and Pakistan. Gates visited both India and Pakistan and conveyed a common message to both the states that the US would not be able to mediate if a war broke out between India and Pakistan. According to some accounts of his visit, he inclined on India to pull off troops from the border and de-escalate the crisis, cautioning that any possible conflict “might go nuclear,” though the Indians discounted that warning as American hysteria.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Gates mission and intense efforts by the US embassies in Delhi and Islamabad succeeded in opening lines of direct communication between India and Pakistan, ultimately resulting in both states crawling away from the potential conflict.

Discourse of Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia after 1998

After the May 1998 nuclear tests, an explicit form of nuclear deterrence steadily developed between India and Pakistan. Following their respective nuclear tests, India and Pakistan began a process of weaponization and defining their nuclear postures. Pakistan after its nuclear weapons tests shifted from employment of its nuclear capability for existential deterrence and termed its nuclear weapons integral parts of its national security. Though Pakistan has claimed that its nuclear weapons are India-centric but they are a source of security from any aggressor. Gradually Pakistan fully integrated nuclear weapons into its military forces and doctrine, credibly threatening the first use of nuclear weapons against the Indian conventional forces in the event they breached Pakistan’s territorial integrity.

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia progressed as a prevailing “condition” rather than an articulated “policy,” before the May 1998 nuclear tests. Even after the 1998 nuclear tests, explicit nuclear deterrence postures and policies surfaced incrementally, generally driven by events and reactions to each other’s behavior in crisis environment. Each side progressively moved away from ambiguity in its posture but it has not been completely ruled out even today. Ambiguity concerning the nuclear threat-based deterrence gradually diminished, but continued to persist in both side’s policy content and deployment status of nuclear forces.¹⁵

¹³ P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 94-95.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 98.

¹⁵ Zafar Iqbal Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence*, 395.

Three crisis situations arose after the May 1998 tests. The Kargil conflict in May 1999 was the first instance of military hostilities between India and Pakistan after both had become declared nuclear weapon states. The second crisis surfaced following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, the outcry in India for punitive or pre-emptive military action against Pakistan was raised to unprecedented levels through most of 2002. The Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 are the third instance when India and Pakistan came close to a war.

The 1999 Kargil War

The Kargil war in 1999 remained limited because of the fear of nuclear weapons as has been pointed out by several Indian government and military officials. Pakistan was able to invoke a sense of unacceptable damage to India prohibiting any disregard for its nascent nuclear weapons capability. Kargil was a harsh reminder that the overt testing and pronouncement of nuclear weapons in 1998 did not essentially put an end to the possibility for a spill-over of conventional conflict into a nuclear exchange.. As against the May 1990 crisis, during the Kargil conflict there was no uncertainty about the nuclear weapons which remained in picture as well as in official calculations on both sides.

Although the conflict was geographically confined to the northern region of the Kashmir LoC, the crisis rapidly deepened with the arrival of larger troops, major weapons systems and air support from India. India reportedly considered a number of options for “horizontal escalation,” e.g., whether to enlarge the conflict at strategically suitable places along the LoC inside Kashmir, or to attack along the international border or even to challenge Pakistan’s access to the Arabian Sea.¹⁶ In anticipation of the horizontal escalation of conflict by India beyond the LoC or the international border, Pakistan reportedly had prepared, if need arose, to employ nuclear weapons. Indian nuclear warheads and delivery systems including Mirage 2000 aircraft, short-ranged Prithvi missiles, and medium-ranged Agni missiles were similarly prepared for possible use.¹⁷

Indian perceived designs of horizontal escalation were prevented by Pakistan’s clear signalling through official statements. The then Pakistani Minister for religious affairs, and senior member of the then ruling party Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), Raja Zafarul Haq, publicly warned that Pakistan could resort to the nuclear option to preserve Pakistani territory, sovereignty, or security. Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Shamshad Ahmad, made explicit threats that Pakistan would “not hesitate to use any weapon in [its]

¹⁶ Ibid., 410.

¹⁷ Ibid.

arsenal to defend [its] territorial integrity.”¹⁸ The employment and signalling of nuclear deterrence played an important role in thwarting the Kargil conflict from escalation and its final management. Indian and Pakistani officials and leaders exchanged direct or indirect nuclear threats no fewer than 13 times between 26 May and 30 June during the Kargil conflict in 1999.

The Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was “known to have seriously considered a Pakistani nuclear strike had India escalated the war.”¹⁹ Chari, Cheema, and Cohen write that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was strict about not expanding the theatre of operations beyond the Kargil sector or attacking the Pakistani forces across the LoC, regardless of the fact that this flouted military logic and accepted heavier casualties. The Indian Air Force was given stern instructions to keep away from attacking targets in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. This restraint was in marked contrast to India’s response in the 1965 and 1971 conflicts, when nuclear weapons had not entered the equation and it had not displayed any inhibitions in invading Pakistan.”²⁰

The 2001-2002 Military Standoff

After the December 2001 terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament, Indian rattling for punitive or pre-emptive military action against Pakistan was elevated to extraordinary levels. India mobilized its armed forces, cut off most channels of communication to Pakistan, and sustained a provoking posture. Bilateral relations of India and Pakistan slumped to their lowest levels since the 1999 Kargil conflict. The BJP launched Operation Parakram in response to the 2001 terrorist attacks against Pakistan’s alleged role. Parakram labelled for the biggest mobilization of the Indian forces since 1971—almost 800,000 troops—with numerous infantry and mountain divisions positioned across the LoC and all three strike corps deployed in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan for the first time in Indian history, prepared to thrust into Pakistan’s vulnerable plains and desert sectors.²¹

Facing the bulk of the Indian military arrayed against it, Pakistan was forced to react with a counteract mobilization of its own. The mobilized armed forces of both the countries were placed on alert, ready for war, for many months. Uncontrollable terrorist activities could have generated new flare-ups at any time, with military reactions exploding into a full-scale war, setting the stage for potential nuclear escalation. Gen. S. Padmanabhan and Prime Minister Vajpayee geared up for a crucial conventional attack on

¹⁸ Quoted in “Any Weapon Will Be Used, Threatens Pak,” *Hindu*, June 1, 1999.

¹⁹ V.K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: An Unfinished War* (Delhi: Sage, 2003), 70–71.

²⁰ Chari, Cheema, and Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 139.

²¹ V.K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: An Unfinished War*, 77–78.

Pakistan in June—the strike corps, concentrated in the Thar, were arranged to carry out penetrating operations to take on and destroy Pakistan’s two strike corps and seize Sindh Province, thus threatening to effectively slice Pakistan in two.²²

On March 23, 2002, President Musharraf while making a speech said: “By Allah’s Grace Pakistan today possesses a powerful military might and can give a crushing reply to all types of aggression. Anybody who poses a challenge to our security and integrity would be taught an unforgettable lesson.”²³ Musharraf repeated this policy in the military standoff that “even an inch” of an Indian attack across border will unleash a storm that will sweep up the enemy. The people of Pakistan have at all times had faith in the capability of the armed forces to impose unbearable damage to the enemy.²⁴ This type of “unbearable damage” to the enemy could only be done with nuclear weapons in this case. Lt. Gen. Javed Ashraf Qazi, former director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), also warned, “If Pakistan is being destroyed through conventional means, we will destroy them by using the nuclear option.”²⁵ Pakistan also tested three nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in a string, conveying an unambiguous deterrent signal to Delhi.²⁶

Pakistan’s nuclear posture openly and effectively shaped Indian decision of not starting a full scale conventional war. In one unquestionable way: a large-scale attack along lines of the designed June offensives, the so-called Sundarji doctrine,²⁷ risked triggering nuclear use. Senior Indian officials maintain that Prime Minister Vajpayee had apprehension that a full-scale military assault could hasten a wider conflagration. Though Vajpayee held that the risk of nuclear war was small, he however saw no benefit in precipitating a crisis of which it might be an outcome.²⁸

The Indian and Pakistani armed forces remained deployed at tremendous cost to equipment and morale for ten long months in an eye ball to eye ball situation until October, when Operation Parakram was officially called off by India and the strike corps returned to their cantonments. Indian military and strategic analysts illustrate Parakram as an expensive and ill-

²² Vipin Narang, *Posturing for Peace*, 62.

²³ “President Address,” *Info Pakistan*, March 23, 2002, http://www.infopak.gov.pk/President_Addresses/Pres_23Marc.htm (accessed February 22, 2012).

²⁴ “Musharraf Vows to ‘Unleash a Storm’ If India Attacks,” *News International*, May 30, 2002.

²⁵ “Pak Will Not Hesitate to Use Nuke against India,” *Press Trust of India*, May 22, 2002.

²⁶ Shishir Gupta, “When India Came Close to War,” *India Today*, December 19, 2002.

²⁷ Walter C. Ladwig III, “A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine,” *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 158-190.

²⁸ Vipin Narang, *Posturing for Peace*, 63.

conceived mobilization that finished as an embarrassing withdrawal of forces after having failed to achieve even its minimum objectives.

2008 Mumbai Terror Attacks

The Mumbai terror attacks stunned India and the whole world. One of the attackers, Ajmal Kasab, was taken alive and during his interrogation links led to Pakistan.²⁹ India geared itself for a limited war on Pakistan, which was to include air strikes on Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) camps in Muzzafarabad, in Pakistani Kashmir, the Let Headquarters in Muredkey, in Pakistani Punjab, and its seminaries in Lahore. The situation was beginning to unravel as a fourth Indo-Pak war.³⁰

India however did not amass its troops along its border with Pakistan. The 2001-2002 Military standoff had made India realize that any attempt of a full scale conventional war with Pakistan was not feasible. From the beginning, India's Congress government, and General Malik (ret'd), accepted that its military choice to strike back against Pakistan were once more restricted, since any significant strikes risked uncontrollable escalation, probably speedily up to the nuclear level.³¹ India was consequently once more mainly restrained by Pakistan's low nuclear threshold from carrying out retaliatory airstrikes against suspected Lashkar camps in Pakistan. Former Army Chief of Staff Roy Chowdhury accepted that "Pakistan's nuclear weapons deterred India from attacking that country after the Mumbai strikes...[and] it was due to Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons that India stopped short of a military retaliation following the attack on Parliament in 2001."³²

Conclusion

Empirical evidence from historical relations between nuclear states suggests that, states with a small number of nuclear weapons have been able to prevent states with much superior nuclear arsenal to initiate a total war. This is obvious as of a survey of all nuclear contention during the Cold War and after. The US-Russia nuclear weapons disparity was asymmetrical till the late 1960s. China's arsenal was small if weighed against the US and Russia when it was at loggerheads with both. North Korea's nuclear potential was and is insignificant in evaluation to those of the United States. However, in each case, the larger power has not had the assurance to utilize military force against the much

²⁹ Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside al Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11* (Pluto Press: London, 2010), 96.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Raj Chengappa and Saurabh Shukla, "Reining in the Rogue," *India Today*, December 15, 2008.

³² Vipin Narang, *Posturing for Peace*, 64.

lesser one. The key to deterrence is risk: when faced with even a small risk of large-scale nuclear damage, states are promptly deterred. This authenticates Kenneth Waltz's view that nuclear deterrence is basically much uncomplicated and is effortlessly gained with a small number of weapons. Pakistan nuclear doctrine of credible minimum deterrence has proved to be a deterrent for Indian conventional or nuclear attacks.

Purely in military stipulations, the "balance" of power between India and Pakistan is immaterial since both possess nuclear weapons. Though, in a wide political wisdom—that is, in terms of ability to manipulate the path of international events—the gap between India and Pakistan is increasing and will almost certainly continue to grow over the years. Pakistan would need to have a better standing in the international politics by forging bilateral and multilateral relations in the region to adopt a policy of economic interdependence. ■