

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: ASSESSING STATES BEHAVIOUR IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

The Pulwama saga has once again brought to the fore the volatility of the region in which full-scale war was ostensibly averted through behind the curtain interlocutors but more by the nightmare of the nuclear holocaust in the region. The threat of nuclear showdown is not eminent anywhere else in the world but in South Asia. This academic foray endeavors to the concept of deterrence in South Asia and the role it has played in maintaining peace, thus far, a series of breaking points notwithstanding. The crises, though averted temporarily with the Kashmir issue remaining unresolved and India resorting to hybrid war against Pakistan, the volatile and uncertain strategic environment of the region has always caused anguish for the international fraternity. In obtaining geostrategic milieu, the US still has the wherewithal to influence the escalation ladder due to its large military footprints in the Indo-Pacific region. However, due to increasing Indo-US convergence of interests in the region, the role of the US can no longer be considered as non-partisan in the imbroglio, especially, when viewed in the context of deep cooperation between Pakistan and China, the epitome being CPEC. This calls for the involvement of international community in maintaining peace in the region. There is a dire need for the international fraternity led by the US to work in a non-partisan manner to maintain normalcy in the region and forge confidence amongst the unpredictable nuclear pugilists.

Keywords: Deterrence, Strategic Stability, Conflict Paradigm, Nuclear Weapons, Cold War.

Introduction

The advent of nuclearization in the subcontinent gave preeminence to the notion of deterrence in the strategic equation between the two arch-rivals of South Asia. The Pulwama incident and its aftermath, the so-called punitive airstrikes at Balakot and the brilliant strategic riposte by Pakistan Air Forces have once again brought to the fore the precariousness and vulnerability of peace in the region in general and to the efficacy of the concept and full-spectrum deterrence doctrine in particular. This almost led to the second postulate of the deterrence theory¹ in which deterrence became unstable with a visible decline of nuclear threshold and brinkmanship was at its peak during the period giving sleepless nights to policymakers on both sides of the divide.² The nuclearization

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of South Asia brought in a state of strategic equilibrium between the two arch-rivals which led to the state of deterrence in the region. The strategic restraint stood the test of time notwithstanding a number of events including Pathankot, Uri and Mumbai attacks. However, the so-called Indian airstrikes at Balakot have left strategists perplexed as to the efficacy of strategic deterrence in future conflicts between two states.

The post-Balakot raised a question: Would the nuclear deterrence prevent a conventional war in South Asia? The Indian strategists are painting a picture that Pakistan's nuclear arsenals notwithstanding Balakot incident have called Pakistani nuclear capability a bluff, thus, dealing a severe blow to the concept of deterrence in the regional milieu. The objective of this inquest is to reevaluate the changing regional security calculus vis-à-vis strategic posturing and the role of deterrence in preventing the conventional war in South Asia, especially, in the post-Balakot environment.

Research on the critical discourse of nuclear deterrence and conflict transformation regarding the behavior of states in South Asia has been carried out through the Research Onion method³ which elaborates on the various stages required to be covered while developing an effective research strategy. Ontologically, the research is based on the interpretivism with a positivist epistemological outlook. The research strategy includes a descriptive and systematic literature review on the concept of deterrence with a specific focus on its implications in South Asia.

Deterrence: Notional Aspects

The concept of deterrence came to the forefront at the beginning of the Cold War with a significant academic inquest. Henry Kissinger defines that "nuclear deterrence is the threat of nuclear attack as retaliation to prevent the opponent from using violence against the vital interests of the one who deters."⁴ Bernard Brodie suggests that "deterrence is a strategy intended to dissuade an adversary from taking an action not yet started; a credible nuclear deterrent must be always at the ready yet never used." Andre Beaufre states that "deterrence prevents an enemy power taking the decision to use armed forces compelling him when faced with a given situation to act or react in the light of the existence of a set of dispositions which constitute an effective threat. The result which it desires to achieve is, therefore, psychological one and it is sought by means of a threat."⁵ Robert Haffa Jr. defined conventional deterrence to be a "policy that seeks to persuade an adversary through the threat of military retaliation that the costs of using military force to resolve political conflict will outweigh the benefit."⁶

Deterrence is a comprehensive strategy bearing the psychological impact on the strategic choices of a nation while undertaking national-level decisions. Having the potential to cause fear and extreme damage, deterrence prevents or dissuades the opponent state(s) from unacceptable behavior. However, the attitude and response would largely depend on the rationality of belligerents as they have to formulate their choices and face consequences, thereof, the ongoing standoff between the US and

North Korea as well as the resolution of Cuban missiles impasse being cases of rational behavior in point.⁷

The end of the Cold War notwithstanding the deterrence regime retained its efficacy for almost two decades until the watershed event of 9/11 that shook its foundation having no appropriate response in the nuclear domain which could be undertaken against such an asymmetric attack. However, the concept of strategic deterrence has been impacted recently by the quest for multi-polarity, the new entrants in the nuclear power club and the increasing influence of Violent Non-State Actors (VNSA). The annexation of Crimea despite NATO's overarching military capabilities and Russian aggression against Georgia are the manifestation of emerging reality in which Russia undertook these actions considering any nuclear response by NATO as less attractive and disproportionate.⁸

The edifice of the deterrence theory rests on the notion that a force inferior in nature, having the destructive capability of weapons, can deter a more powerful belligerent with the condition that this force remains protected against destruction by a surprise attack. Based on the notions of psychology, deterrence aims to deter the hostile belligerent from initiating an action that has yet to start. The inhibition is demonstrated through the posturing of a threat of reprisal or to dissuade them from undertaking something that another state desires. As a credible proponent of nuclear deterrence, Bernard Brodie advocates that deterrence should always be in the state of readiness yet never be used. It can, hence, be concluded that the use of power to hurt, as bargaining power, is the edifice of the theory of deterrence and optimally successful when it is held in reserve.⁹ Frank C. Zagare, on the other hand, posits towards the deficiencies of the deterrence theory and instead proffers "Perfect deterrence"¹⁰ which postulates that states may vary in their internal characteristics more so in the credibility of their threats of retaliation.¹¹

While proponents of the deterrence theory led by Frank C. Zagare have long been advocating its utility on the ground because major wars have been averted due to the effectiveness of deterrence, and many scholars have been advocating its downside citing a number of inconsistencies in the theory.¹² Similarly, several leading pundits of the deterrence theory have altered their stance on the efficacy of deterrence owing to a host of reasons including proliferation and instabilities in nations possessing nuclear weapons and resultant absence of safeguards of nuclear weapons. Such stalwarts include Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn and Bill Perry.¹³

A deterrence policy can be subsumed in two categories: direct deterrence, i.e., preventing an armed attack against a state without the involvement of great powers, and extended deterrence, which encompasses preventing an attack on another state involving great powers. Successful deterrence hinges on defending the state's strategy vis-à-vis the extent of attacking the state's vulnerability. The former rests on a strategy that balances coercion and credibility based on the criterion of proportionality, reciprocity, and coercive credibility while minimizing the domestic and international constraints. The vulnerability of the attacking state is carved by domestic political and

economic environments.¹⁴ The three imperatives for deterrence include enabling geostrategic environment, strategic restraint and responsibility, and maintenance of balance. The geostrategic mosaic includes a sustainable mechanism for dispute resolution, whereas, strategic restraint and maintenance of balance in nuclear deterrence emphasize the need for arms control rather than the competition.¹⁵

The application of the deterrence theory to non-nuclear, post-nuclear, and hybrid warfare is denoted as Modern Deterrence which aims to deter the adversary from taking offensive action by imposing costs outweighing the gains. Modern Deterrence reduces the threat of non-nuclear attacks by establishing norms of behavior, tailoring of deterrence threats to individual actors, governmental and societal response adoption, and establishing the credibility of threat with an adversary.¹⁶ The deterrence theory has also been criticized for a wide array of issues including suicidal/psychotic propensities of the adversary to budge to the threat of use of force, haste to go for first strike advantage with the intent of destroying adversary's capability to retaliate, diplomatic and political nuances, and escalation of perceived threat.¹⁷

Regional Strategic Calculus

The recent events unfolding in Kashmir with the epitome being the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35(A) of the Indian constitution has once again highlighted that the South Asian region will continue to remain turbulent owing to unresolved issues. Despite the best efforts of India to wish away the Kashmir issue, the recent events have amply clarified that unless the unfinished agenda of partition is resolved according to the aspiration of the local population, the nuclear-armed region will continue to simmer in a war-like situation. This outstanding issue has led to other disputes including boundary disputes and the so-called cross border terrorism which India alleges Pakistan to harbor. The resultant lack of trust has created an atmosphere of arms buildup in the region and growing size of nuclear arsenals, hence, the emergence of a nuclear factor in the subcontinent.

The equilibrium of power in South and East Asia has been disturbed. The relentless bellicosity between the states has ostensibly molded the strategic outlook of the region where enormous resources have been diverted by these nations to acquire unparalleled means of power as instruments to favorably mold the strategic environment.¹⁸ The South Asian conflict paradigm is primarily shaped by the unresolved conflict of Kashmir and hegemonic attitude of India which has led both states embarking upon the nuclear path to draw the security environment as envisaged by their policymakers being the first case of two arch-rivals having nuclear arsenals that has made South Asia as a potential nuclear flashpoint.¹⁹ There is, therefore, a need for a discourse on the dynamics of nuclear deterrence and its impact on conflict transformation, particularly, in the aftermath of the February 27 incident vis-à-vis the role of international actors and application of strategic restraints regime in the region.

The strategic environment in South and East Asia is an interwoven web of power contestation amongst the states. In response to China's entry into nuclear club and resultant attainment of regional power, India undertook the nuclear path in 1974

and conducted nuclear tests in 1998 which was followed by Pakistan with equal intensity to maintain the balance of power in South Asia. Drawing inspiration from this trend, Iran and North Korea have embarked upon the journey to acquire nuclear status. Post-1998, both belligerents have shown tremendous restraints by avoiding a full-scale war. By keeping the conflict limited to Kashmir, both sides have demonstrated that nuclear deterrence is the key to strategic restraints and avoidance of a direct military confrontation.

The Indian quest to counter growing Chinese influence has made her a natural ally of the West in general and the US in particular, which is amplified by Indian ambitions to achieve a permanent seat in the UNSC. Indian access to the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) while denying the same to Pakistan and the US abetting India in pivot to Asia or rebalancing Asia initiative speak volumes about the US tilt towards India in the region.²⁰ The meteoric rise of India has triggered a strategic competition with China and Pakistan in the region.²¹

Four sets of assumptions are proffered by the states having ambitions to acquire nuclear status, i.e., security consideration, economic advantages, domestic pressures, and political prestige. Security reasons remained the predominant factor for Pakistan to go nuclear. The Indian “Smiling Buddha” nuclear tests of 1974 added further fuel to Pakistani ambitions to adopt a nuclear path for its security. Pakistan and India have been engaged in different kinds of conflicts. The military escalation of 1986 in the garb of exercise Brass-tacks is a case in point. The situation became tense and India congregated its military might on the eastern border of Pakistan in preparation for any possible military showdown. Pakistan’s perception of being extensively coerced by India to give up or regress on the core issues of Kashmir, water resources and other border demarcations further got ingrained in the strategic calculus of Pakistan. Whereas, the nuclearization of South Asia has brought in strategic stability in the region by averting the prospects of full-scale war. However, this has not solved the burning issue of Kashmir, thus, transformed the conflict paradigm transiting into other forms like hybrid and proxy warfare leading to a stability and instability conundrum in South Asia. This phenomenon of stability/instability paradox has been described by S. Paul Kapur as making of nuclear relationship safer but also causing a lower-level conflict in the subcontinent.²²

The strategic stability has given incentive to the pugilists to engage in sub-conventional and non-traditional warfare in which India unabatedly blames Pakistan for abetting uprising in Kashmir and other incidents like Mumbai attacks of 2008, Pathankot and Uri incidents of 2016 and Baramula incident of 2019. Pakistan reciprocates by blaming India of stoking instability in FATA (now a part of KP) and Balochistan through RAW-NDS nexus, the arrest of Kulbushun Yadav corroborating the assertion.²³ However, the appetite for a confrontation between the two hostile neighbors remains low, the nuclear deterrence being the instrument of stability in the region.²⁴

The nuclear restraint has forced India to re-orientate its military offensive options by curtailing the scope and objectives giving birth to new Indian military strategies known as Proactive Operations (PAO) and Cold Start Doctrine (CSD), which

are aimed at achieving objectives while remaining within the restraint regime. The strategies of CSD and PAO have posed yet another challenge for the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence as a massive nuclear response against limited or multiple Indian military incursions closer to the border, could be viewed as disproportionate and irrational. To respond to the threat of full-spectrum deterrence, Pakistan embarked upon the development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW) for area-specific use,²⁵ thus, leading to a 'no war no peace' situation where both the hostile states are endeavoring to achieve their strategic ends by using sub-conventional warfare and indirect means keeping the regional environment hostile and simmering.

From the above discussion, it can be subsumed that nuclear deterrence has significantly altered the conflict paradigm in South Asia causing deep anguish for the international community and leading the US to act as a balancer and remains pivot to deescalate and defuse the tension between the two states.²⁶ To prevent the spiraling of conflict beyond the controllable level of escalation, the US has been providing effective diplomatic channels evident from the active support provided by the US to defuse the Kargil crisis in 1999.²⁷ While the US still retains the capability to play a dominant role in escalation control within the region due to its huge military and economic clout, the growing Indo-US nexus is clearly undermining Pakistan, who considering US role is forcing Pakistan to integrate other important players in the region like China and Russia in the security calculus of the region to balance out perceived US tilt towards India.

Chinese mediation in the region would not be acceptable to India due to obvious reasons. Russia, a Cold War ally of India and having improved trajectory of relationship with Pakistan, might have space but the dominant role of the US may not allow her to act as a stabilizing factor in the region. The outsourcing escalation control consists of initiating and maturing bilateral institutionalized mechanisms for escalation control including CBMs and Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures (NRRM).²⁸ In the Indo-Pak scenario, outsourcing would remain undermined due to the historic mistrust and unresolved Kashmir dispute. The conflicting interests of the US and China in South Asia notwithstanding the permanent membership of the UNSC place them in a position to play an important role in the region.²⁹ However, this would entail developing CBMs and NRRMs for mutual deterrence to hold and to avoid any miscalculation.³⁰ Towards this end, Pakistan proposed a Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) to India in 1998 to limit the nuclear arms race in South Asia.³¹ The SRR comprises of three inter-related facets, i.e., maintaining nuclear restraint to uphold deterrence stability, maintaining conventional arms balance, and averting conflicts and seek some subsequent resolution. Pakistan's proposal for SSR could not gain favor with India owing to the linking of conflict resolution with conventional and nuclear force restraints.

Regional Security Calculus Vis-à-vis Nuclear Deterrence in the South Asian Context

The South Asian security cauldron carries the burden of legacy inherited from British Raj. With the Kashmir issue remaining unresolved for the last seven decades, the trust deficit between the two neighbors has widened with every passing day and durable

peace remains elusive. The main variables undermining durable peace include Kashmir issue, terrorism, growing disequilibrium in conventional power, Indian quest for regional hegemony, radicalized Indian policies towards Pakistan, growing nuclear arsenals, and doctrinal asymmetry. All of these factors leading to a bilateral gridlock in CBMs and arms control measures.³² Deterrence has been working well so far owing to the near-parity in nuclear arsenals of both countries and massive riposte capabilities, thus, inhibiting any space for a pre-emptive strike by any belligerent. This stalemate has led to the attainment of national interests and objectives by pursuing a sub-strategic sphere, i.e., remaining below the nuclear threshold, thus, foray into hybrid warfare. This has led to the exposition of TNW in the regional milieu. While focusing on blaming Pakistan, any event that is calibrated as the crossing of Indian threshold of tolerance may invoke Indian military response, the Pulwama being a case in point. This raises a question that is deterrence failed in the post-Pulwama environment.³³

Efficacy of Deterrence in Post-Pulwama Environment

Achieving its objectives while remaining below the nuclear threshold, India introduced the much-trumpeted CSD in which it would rather than going for spatial depth, the Indian military would make shallow offensive maneuvers to destroy the war-fighting capacity of Pakistan, thus, rein in the so-called rogue elements. Pakistan responded to this by introducing the TNW on the battlefield. The deterrence theory postulates two scenarios, i.e., equilibrium and disequilibrium. In a state of equilibrium, the reduced security dilemma and threshold of using nuclear weapons raise the prospects of peace in the region, whereas, in case of disequilibrium, the lowering of nuclear threshold resulting in the failure of deterrence and possibility of war increases. Whereas, the nuclear deterrence stood the test of times even in events like Kargil. The raising of the ante-post-Pulwama has cast shadows of doubts on the efficacy of deterrence in the region in any future conflict, especially, when seen in the background of the reelection of BJP in India. The so-called Balakot strikes are being projected as a failure of deterrence. The fact that India chooses only one point for demonstrating its military might instead of going for an all-out offensive is being projected as limited aim keeping the conflict well below the nuclear threshold, hence, the efficacy of deterrence remains in place.

It is assumed that in the cost-benefit analysis, Pakistan acting as the deterrer was able to impose caution on India by raising the cost for India to expand its offensive operations while going for similar response across multiple points in Indian territory. The spectacular response by the PAF reestablished deterrence and reinforced redlines. The analysis of the recent escalation would suggest that by limiting their choices of attack by both sides, nuclear overhang played a decisive role in preventing a full-scale war. The retaliatory strikes by the PAF amply demonstrated the cost it would incur on India, thus, kept the deterrence intact.

Conclusion

The efficacy of the concept of deterrence has been questioned by security analysts based on the so-called Indian surgical strikes of 2016³⁴ and the recent in Balakot. These self-assumed Indian offensive actions have broken the threshold of TNWs. The matching and vigorous response of the PAF is, in fact, the beginning of a new era of the concept of failing deterrence. Whereas, the recent statement of Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, regarding the revision of “No First Use”³⁵ has put the theory of deterrence into question once again. The analysis of the recent escalation in post-Pulwama incident concludes that the possibility of tactical skirmishes in any future conflict cannot be ruled out, however, raising to a full-scale war with nuclear overhang is not envisaged. It can also be concluded that Pakistan’s conventional deterrence will redress slight imbalances while nuclear deterrence will ensure escalation control and the two taken together will strengthen overall deterrence.

The unfolding of the events in Kashmir has amply demonstrated that this will remain a nuclear flashpoint in the region until it is not resolved according to the aspirations of the local populace, otherwise, peace will remain elusive. The situation gets precarious when viewed in the backdrop of geographically contiguous adversaries being nuclear-armed with little reaction time. The concept of deterrence in such an uncertain environment becomes subsumed and gets pre-eminence. Both sides must, therefore, remain well below the nuclear threshold and maintain the integrity of deterrence. Sanity must prevail notwithstanding the popular sentiment. This could be achieved through CBMs, track-II diplomacy and foremost the third-party mediation.

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