STRATEGIC STABILITY: NUCLEAR AND CONVENTIONAL DIMENSIONS

Lt Gen (Retd) Asad Durrani

Strategic stability is a nebulous concept. A region may be seen as strategically 'stable' or 'unstable' depending upon one's perspective, and by reading, differently, the same given environment. South Asia aptly illustrates this ambivalence. During the first twenty five years of their existence as separate states, India and Pakistan fought two wars[1]. Ever since, despite many crises, both before and after the nuclear tests of 1998, they have avoided a major armed conflict. Are the relations between the two now strategically stable?

Most analysts from the Region suggest that they are. Their main rationale is that even if some of these crises like the Kargil crisis of 1999 and the 2002 Standoff were serious, the two countries prevented an escalation. The argument against, mostly from outside the Region, is as convincing: "Although both India and Pakistan are now nuclear weapon states, their relations remain crisis prone with the outside powers often having to intervene. This is evidence enough that South Asia was strategically unstable [2]".

The two lines of argument are overly simplistic. Strategic stability is not a static state. According to Shaun Gregory[3]: it is "*subject to change over time (in crises perhaps even on a minute-by minute basis), and (to) the vagaries of events and process outcomes; within the state (for example the rise of religious extremism, the terrorist threat); within the region (for example, asymmetric economic development, the war on terrorism, the role of external players such as the United States and China); and at the international level (for example, globalisation)*". That the strategic stability cannot be taken for granted is also emphasized by Jehangir Karamat[4]: "*miscalculations and accidents can lead to inadvertent military conflict, escalation and use of nuclear weapons*".

Like absolute security, absolute stability, too, was a rare phenomenon. In strained relationships, crises were inevitable. If the

adversaries had the motivation and the capacity to defuse them, or prevent them from escalating to a state of general war, their relations were potentially stable. This article aims to assess if India and Pakistan had the ability and the will to restore stability whenever it was disturbed.

Deterrence Stability

Deterrence stability is the first criterion used by Shaun Gregory[5] to evaluate strategic stability. *"- that each side is credibly deterred (by the other)... (and) there is no uncertainty in the minds of either (about) the pillars on which deterrence rests: means to deter; ability and willingness to carryout deterrence threats; assured control of deterrent forces; and rational adversaries making expected cost-benefit calculus".* It would seem that since some of these pillars were not static- like the 'means to deter' (countries constantly refining and improving their arms inventories; "arms racing" in common language) - deterrence stability needed to be constantly restored. The logic is not strictly applicable to a nuclear environment.

A country that can survive a 'first strike' with sufficient of its own nuclear assets to inflict "unacceptable" damage upon the aggressor, has a credible nuclear deterrence. And since there was no assured way to eliminate, even neutralise, the entire nuclear arsenal of any country (one may not know about all of them; even if one did, some weapons may not be accurately located, or may move before engagement; and some of them even when correctly identified and located, may not be effectively engaged), nuclear powers mutually deter use of nukes. Conventional deterrence, however, is a different ballgame.

To be effective, conventional deterrence must create a reasonable doubt in the mind of an aggressor that he may not achieve his objective. The most likely outcome of a conventional war between India and Pakistan was a "strategic stalemate". This alone was sufficient reason to assume that neither side was likely to plan a "big war". (The other reason of course is that major wars carry greater risk of nuclear conflagration.) That however did not preclude either side pursuing a more limited objective. India for

example may find initiating war a political compulsion; like for example when its parliament was attacked.

The problem is that some of our vulnerable areas are close to the Indian borders and are threatened even in a limited conflict. Moreover, we are sensitive to the threats of war as these affect our economic activity. We therefore like to caution that even a limited war between India and Pakistan would escalate "beyond control"- a euphemism for crossing of the nuclear threshold. This "threat" would not impress unless backed by a will to use nuclear weapons early in the battle.

For credible nuclear deterrence, an important prerequisite is that in a *certain situation* (that though not clearly defined but would certainly be extraordinary) nuclear weapons might be used. This assumption must be made despite the possibility that even in a desperate situation a decision, that regardless of what it did to the enemy would most likely spell "the end" for own side, *might not be taken*. In other words: the side under duress that has the onus to pull the nuclear trigger opts not to do so. In nuclear parlance, it is called "self deterrence": abandoning a course of action because of its likely consequences. Hence, there are good reasons that the nuclear powers are reluctant to define nuclear thresholds. If declared, it would not only indicate the losses a country was prepared to accept, but also commit it to a decision that it would rather not have to take. Nuclear thresholds therefore, whether declared or not, were bound to be reasonably high; certainly higher than were likely to be crossed in limited wars.

In any case, having initiated Kargil in the belief that after our overt nuclearisation limited conflicts were unlikely to become nuclear, suggesting now that they could, sounds a bit disingenuous. It is more likely in fact that because of the risks of a major conflict, both India and Pakistan (indeed supported by interested outsiders) would carefully contain their conflicts to tactical levels. Strategic stability, therefore, remains "technically" in place.

Arms Race Stability

We have already argued that a nuclear arms race was unnecessary, and is indeed undesirable. But it would be unrealistic to expect that in a conflictual relationship, adversaries would remain unmoved by, or unconcerned with, nuclear acquisitions by the opposite number. Besides possible military implications, these also impact the public opinion. And lest one forgets, nuclear weapons were in the first place instrument of politics. That explains, to some extent, the interest our people take in missile development.

Delivery means, demonstrated or generally acknowledged to be effective, are an important part of credible deterrence. Unconventional carriers, suitcase bombs for example, are difficult to demonstrate and therefore do not serve the purpose. An aircraft on the other hand, being more vulnerable to interception, was not the most preferred carrier. As delivery means therefore, nuclear capable missiles become our mainstay. Their range, though not all important, plays a significant role in the public debate that builds the psychological environment.

In theory, any missile that could reach important Indian cities like Delhi would do. People's morale, however, was better served if we had all of India in range. On the other hand, if the Indians developed a missile like the Agni that covered all our territory, we would rather believe that since Pakistan could be engaged with shorter range missiles, Agni must be meant for other countries- China for example. This line of argument serves a dual purpose: it deflects attention from Agni's comparative invulnerability; and in public perception, gets China and others join-in on our side.

The missile race between the two countries is indeed aimed at objectives beyond psychological warfare. Besides range, speed and payload; since missile interception systems are likely to be improved and refined, miniaturisation will be an important development objective. There was, therefore, little chance that in the foreseeable future India would induct a ballistic missile defence system (like the one based on Patriot Advance Capability 3

missiles). The rationale again is a direct corollary of the nuclear environment.

Defence against nuclear attack was effective only if it was foolproof. Even one missile that got through could do "unacceptable" damage. No system was likely to ensure such protection. Even if one did, the other side would find unconventional means of delivery, further complicating deterrence stability. Moreover, since Pakistan would soon acquire sea-based delivery systems, India could ill afford the cost of all-round coverage. It may however buy some of these systems for technological reasons.

A major indicator that both India and Pakistan wished to maintain nuclear stability was their conscious decision not to produce or induct tactical nuclear weapons. Admittedly, the cost and the effect (tactical weapons creating strategic effects in our operational environment) may also have constrained them; but the symbolism was still important. Acquiring this capability would indicate lack of faith in deterrence and, therefore, preparation to fight a nuclear war.

Maintaining conventional stability through arms acquisition was a more complex affair.

Stability at both conventional and nuclear levels may be conducive for peace; but if it denied any military option- any good one at least- then that is not what states like India and Pakistan desire deep down. Pakistan as the smaller country would then consider developing sub-conventional means. And, India, its nuclear superiority being practically unusable, would genuinely seek a cutting conventional edge. Dr Rodney Jones succinctly asks the question: "is the instability due to conventional imbalance"? And then provides an answer: "in future, the disparity in the two air forces would be the most serious factor for the conventional *and the unconventional* instability"[6].

The Indian desire to achieve decisive advantage in air to compliment its maritime superiority makes plenty of sense. The

terrain configuration in the southern half of Pakistan, desert and the coastline, is more suitable for mechanised operations supported by seaborne forces. Air superiority here would play a vital role. If Pakistan tried to maintain conventional equilibrium, it was likely to suffer the *Soviet Syndrome*[7]. The problem is that Pakistan can only escape this trap by displaying a clear resolve to lower its nuclear threshold. I suspect this is what Dr Jones implied by "the conventional imbalance resulting in conventional *and un-conventional* instability". Defence collaboration between India and the US- a part of their bigger deal of July 2005- thus has a serious implication for Indo-Pak strategic stability: it lowers Pakistan's nuclear threshold.

Pakistan has a range of 'unhappy' choices to restore stability if India's drive to upset the conventional balance continued: exhaust itself in a conventional arms race; show resolve for early use of nuclear weapons; try to dissuade India from seeking an unbalancing advantage; or unconventional means. Carrying the peace process to an "irreversible" stage would be a 'happy', though not an autonomous, choice.

Crisis Stability

Dr Gregory defines the crises that can threaten strategic stability as "periods of unanticipated threats to core norms, values and interests, characterized by time urgency and the risk of imminent escalation"[8] Indeed, there have been a number of events after the last major war between India and Pakistan in 1971, that were regarded as *crises* (some of them beyond their control), but did not escalate into serious armed conflict.

The two invasions of Afghanistan- by the Soviet Union in 1979 and by the US in 2001- were certainly serious crises for Pakistan. Paradoxically, they improved Indo-Pak stability *by inducting external stabilizers*. The uprising in Kashmir in 1990 again had the potential and, according to many, all the making of a war between the two countries. The then American president, Bush senior, sent Robert Gates, his deputy national security advisor, to help prevent a "nuclear conflict". The fact is that India -probably for

domestic reasons- mobilized symbolically, and Pakistan hardly moved a soldier out of barracks.

Then there were two comparable developments with widely different consequences. Indian incursion in the Siachen Glacier area (1984) resulted in a low intensity local conflict that has lasted the last two decades, but is not seen as "destabilizing". Pakistan's crossing of the LOC in Kargil (1999), on the other hand, raised universal alarm, got the US president involved, and even though the conflict remained limited, Pakistan was blamed for trying to upset a delicate balance in a nuclear setting. Obviously, strategic stability is a function of the total environment. It also explains why apparently a more serious crisis, the standoff of 2002, was unlikely to lead to a major conventional war, let alone to a nuclear holocaust.

Mobilisation by India, after the alleged terrorist attacks on its parliament, was a political compulsion- to demonstrate that India could give a befitting response. It was also opportunism to get onto the "terrorism bandwagon". There was however little chance, except by accident, that either side started a serious conflict of uncertain consequences under the full global gaze and within striking distance of the American forces. But it did serve an additional, perhaps the primary, purpose: it created multiple pressures on Pakistan regarding its role in the Kashmiri resistance. Major external powers insisted that we renounced all material support. Domestic sentiment on the other hand was to resist this pressure. Paradoxically, when the crisis was over, conditions to restore strategic stability had become more favourable.

(*"In the real world it is not just the existence of power, but the nagging fear that it might be used, which deters the aggressor"*- Nixon.) After the overt nuclearisation of the Subcontinent, Pakistan mistakenly believed that the prospects of a nuclear war alone were enough to help resolve the Kashmir dispute. It therefore often insinuated that if the issue was not resolved, a nuclear war might ensue. It found-out overtime that its resolve to use nukes in pursuit of this objective, and therefore these threats, were not credible. India, as we have already argued, used threat of a conventional conflict to good effect. Once the full mobilisation of 2002, that made

this threat as credible as it could, was rolled back, this card too had run its course. The peace process that restarted soon thereafter was helpful. But even if had not, with the threats of war now receding, relations between the two countries were bound to become more stable.

Strategic stability is indeed subject to the vagaries of events, and one can always add to the list (3). Another attack on a sensitive Indian target (by terrorists or a rogue operation); Indo-US collaboration; India and Afghanistan, encouraged by the US, beleaguering Pakistan for not doing enough on cross-border violations; all that and much more can destabilise the Region. But the core question still remains germane: would India and Pakistan do more to defuse the crisis; or would they let it escalate into war in the belief that it would either be contained below the perceived nuclear threshold, or that the self deterrence would prevent nuclear conflagration?

Conclusion

A definitive answer to this question was only possible if we assumed that both India and Pakistan were rational actors. In that case, the country precipitating the crisis would hope to achieve its objective through the threat of war or in a limited war; reasonably assured that once the objective was achieved, the hostilities would end, either because the adversary would have no other rational course, or due to third party intervention. Neither country so desperately pursues an objective for which it was willing to push the other to its nuclear threshold or risk testing its limits of self deterrence. Based on past behaviour, we can reasonably assume that the two countries would exercise restraint.

All crises between India and Pakistan, whether they led to an armed conflict or were defused, had many commonalities: these were deliberate, neither side stumbling into a crisis; escalation into war was unhurried, giving crisis management and diplomacy a reasonable chance; and when they did go to war, both of them spared non-military targets to avoid unnecessary ill will. Resisting escalation was also the hallmark of the only post-nuclear armed

encounter (Kargil). The most substantial evidence that both the countries, though obstinate and crisis prone at times, prefer diffusion over aggravation is provided by them invariably returning to the table after a crisis. In this respect their post nuclearisation record is astonishing.

The framework that the two countries invented to resolve their mutual disputes, commonly known as the "composite dialogue", predates their overt nuclearisation. In August 1997, the two foreign secretaries meeting in Islamabad decided that the major issues between India and Pakistan would be taken up by eight working groups and would be settled "in an integrated manner". It was a politically expedient formulation. Otherwise, the simpler problems have obviously to be resolved first to create the right environment to address the more complex issues.

True; the wisdom of the formula has not been matched by the courage needed to implement it. But then it is also true that both Countries reverted to its fold after every crisis. It was an important part of the Lahore Agreement (February 1999) when the two had to find a *modus vivendi* after their nuclear tests. Kargil and the military coup in Pakistan, both in 1999, vitiated the atmosphere. The Agra Summit of July 2001, though it failed to find common grounds, was again an attempt to revive the peace process. The common ground was eventually found after the two countries had been chastened in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Standoff of 2002, in the January 2004 Vajpaee-Musharraf meeting. There may be doubts and reservations about each other's sincerity and on the speed of the process, but neither side has shown any inclination to abandon the track.

That alone bespeaks well for the existing strategic stability. But even if the process was derailed yet again, because of another crisis or due to change of environment, there are good reasons to believe that the sum total of the factors would not let the stability be knocked around too severely.

End Notes

1. In 1965 and 1971. The Kashmir war of 1948, often counted as the "third war", was at best *a limited war*. Operations were restricted to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and "officially" Pakistan Army was not a party.
2. General Jehangir Karamat, one of our former COAS and CJCSC, in his talk at the Institute of Strategic Stability, Bradford University, on Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres in South Asia, expressed similar views: "for those who observe South Asia from the outside, it is considered a most dangerous place and a region in which a nuclear exchange could be a reality.... This is not what most South Asians think".
3. Shaun, Gregory, "*Rethinking Strategic Stability in South Asia*", SASSU Research Report No. 3, September 2005.
4. Jehangir, Karamat, ibid.
5. Shaun, Gregory, ibid.
6. Rodney W Jones, "*Conventional Military Imbalance and Strategic Stability in South Asia*", SASSU Research Paper No. 1, March 2005, Page 5.
7. A allegory used to describe situations akin to the Soviet Union's self destructive approach when keeping pace with the West's defence capabilities.
8. Shaun Gregory, opcit..

Author

Lt Gen. (R) Assad Durrani is a soldier scholar and has had varied professional and diplomatic experience. He has held the coveted positions of Director General ISI, Inspector General Training and Evaluation and Commandant National Defence College. He also served as Pakistan's Ambassador to Germany and Saudi Arabia.