

India-Pakistan Crises and the Evolving Dyadic Deterrence Model

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Abstract

In 2019, India and Pakistan were once again embroiled in a military crisis that demonstrated the willingness of both sides to engage in a sub-conventional conflict while avoiding a major war. India attempted an aerial surgical strike across the Line of Control (LoC) into mainland Pakistan and claimed to have called its nuclear bluff. Pakistan, on the other hand, refused to indulge in nuclear brinkmanship despite the *nuclearism* behaviour from the other side, and responded with a proportionate surgical strike demonstrating its capacity to inflict sufficient pain to the adversary. The crisis eventually dissipated validating the significance of nuclear deterrence in maintaining strategic stability in South Asia, besides restoring the credibility of Pakistan's conventional deterrence against an adversary that enjoys sufficient numerical advantage. In view of the lessons learnt from the Balakot crisis, where conventional and nuclear deterrence were both at play, it may be useful to analyse different deterrence models that have helped maintain strategic stability during the various crises since the nuclearisation of the region, including the most recent 2019 one, and whether these models will remain relevant in a future India-Pakistan crisis, especially when one side is continuously introducing innovative war-fighting concepts and new technologies to complicate the regional deterrence matrix.

Keywords: Nuclear Deterrence, Deterrence Types, Surgical Strikes, Emerging Technologies, Nuclear Dyad, India-Pakistan Crises.

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Introduction

Nuclear deterrence has remained a contested social construct that continues to be debated amongst nuclear optimists and pessimists with different conclusions drawn by either side. The Cold war nuclear lexicon, that remains a useful guide to understanding the nature of the deterrence relationship between nuclear-armed adversaries, has several inherent limitations, and may not necessarily have universal application due to the different nature and scope of military competition between India and Pakistan. It is, therefore, important to validate various deterrence models and concepts, in view of the lessons drawn from the past crises to understand the evolving deterrence relationship in South Asia.

This article shall aim to define various constructs used to explain the nature of deterrence relationship between nuclear-armed adversaries, and how these could be interpreted in a dyadic deterrence equation between India and Pakistan, while contesting the notion of a triangular deterrence relationship, involving China. The lessons drawn from the past crises provide useful insight about how nuclear deterrence has been used differently by India and Pakistan to achieve their political objectives. This study will also analyse India's contested Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) and Pakistan's response in the form of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) highlighting the implications for stability-instability, especially when India is signalling a review of its nuclear doctrine and engaged in the modernisation of its military hardware.

Revisiting Deterrence: Its Need and Relevance to South Asia

Deterrence is a coercive strategy used to persuade an adversary that it must not act in a way that could be considered detrimental to one's own security interests. The word *deter* is 'derived from the Latin word *deterre* which means to discourage or restrain the adversary from taking certain actions that are considered detrimental to own security.'¹ Deterrence as a concept predates the advent of nuclear weapons but, in modern times, it has mostly been associated with the threat of use of nuclear weapons.

¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Nuclear Deterrence: A Ladybird Expert Book* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2018), 4.

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Nuclear deterrence also faces an inherent dilemma. If nuclear weapons are used in a conflict, deterrence may have already failed; and if a state continues to insist that these are mainly political weapons, and not to be used, these will stop deterring the adversary. Therefore, nuclear weapons only deter by the fact that they remain useable.²

Nuclear deterrence can be divided into two main categories – *deterrence by punishment* and *deterrence by denial*. The former promises punitive retaliation to discourage and prevent the adversary from pursuing an undesired path; whereas the latter is aimed at complicating the cost-benefit calculus of the adversary by reducing the incentive for him to pursue an undesired path that would be detrimental to one's security. There is yet another form of a coercive strategy known as *compellence* that can be used to convince the adversary to adopt a certain course of action under the fear of nuclear punishment, and could arguably be classified as deterrence, but most scholars do not agree with this characterisation and maintain distinction between the two.

Denial strategies are more persuasive and easier to recognise, while the threat of punishment requires clarity of intent by the leadership and the willingness to use nuclear weapons if required. Since there is no absolute distinction between the two, it is quite possible that both strategies may also overlap.³ For instance, states may opt for a pre-emptive counterforce strike to degrade an adversary's nuclear potential with the primary objective of denying him the option of retaliation, but it also increases the risk of a nuclear war while reducing the incentive to negotiate peace before the nuclear weapons have been used. It is, therefore, not unusual for most nuclear states to opt for deterrence by denial strategies by developing conventional responses besides keeping each other's cities hostage to counter-value strikes.

This could help raise the nuclear threshold and provide an incentive for bargaining but has its own shortcomings due to the nature of conventional deterrence that remains *contestable*, especially in an

² Michael Quinlan, *Thinking about Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30.

³ Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence by Denial and Punishment*, Research Monograph No. 1 (Princeton, New Jersey: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1959), 1.

asymmetric military equation, where the one with the military advantage decides to test the resolve of the other, who in turn may be forced to respond with nuclear weapons, thus, leading to a deterrence breakdown. This, nevertheless, does not mean that the *contestable* nature of conventional deterrence makes it less credible, or that nuclear threats are always *uncontestable* and more credible.⁴

For deterrence to remain credible, it is important to understand what deters and why, and under what circumstances. Some strategies may work under a peculiar environment but may not be useful under different circumstances. Capability alone, therefore, is not the only factor. Clarity of purpose and adversary's pain threshold are also important determinants in identifying what strategies are likely to be effective in a deterrence relationship between countries like India and Pakistan, where every crisis has had its own dynamics requiring different deterrence models to achieve the desired objectives. Before analysing these models, it may be useful to understand the nature of security competition in South Asia, and whether the deterrence relationship is triangular, involving China, or a set of two asymmetric dyads between India-Pakistan and India-China.

India-Pakistan, and China – Triangular or Dyadic Deterrence?

India's rise as a major power and a potential adversary to China has strengthened the commonly held perception that the ongoing nuclear competition in the region is triangular in nature involving China, India and Pakistan. Some have labelled it part of a 'strategic chain' linking the United States (US) with the three Asian nuclear-weapon states.⁵ This characterisation is driven primarily by political considerations and do not accurately reflect the regional deterrence dynamics keeping in view the fact

⁴ James J. Wirtz, "How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 58, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-12_Issue-4/Wirtz.pdf.

⁵ Robert Einhorn and W.P.S. Sidhu, "The Strategic Chain: Linking Pakistan, India, China and the United States" (paper, Brookings Institution, 2017), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/acnpi_201703_strategic_chain.pdf.

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that all three states acquired nuclear capabilities for distinctly different reasons and view its utility differently.

China

China embarked upon its nuclear weapons programme to prevent nuclear blackmail from major powers especially the US and the former Soviet Union. The Chinese leadership initially considered nuclear weapons as ‘paper tigers’ — a tool for political coercion, but also feared that these could become ‘real tigers’, if China did not build its own nuclear potential.⁶

China is the only country that offers unconditional No First Use (NFU) commitment. It had earlier committed not to compete in numbers and that these weapons would not be used unless attacked by nuclear weapons.⁷ Its nuclear capability was never targeted against a specific threat, but ongoing developments led by the US to complicate the regional security environment has emerged as a major security concern for Beijing. The country is, therefore, gearing up to develop options that could ensure the credibility of its deterrence posture against its regional adversaries, as well as extra-regional powers.

India

India’s nuclear weapons programme, on the other hand, was driven by its desire to be reckoned as a technologically advanced country and a potential major power. India never faced an existential threat from Pakistan, China or any of the extra-regional powers that could otherwise justify its nuclear weapons pursuit. The country started its nuclear weapons pursuit in the 1950s,⁸ when it had very close relations with China, and Pakistan posed no security challenge. When China decided to test its first nuclear device in

⁶ Li Bin and Tong Zhao, eds., *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 21-24, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf.

⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸ In 1959, Homi J. Bhaba - the father of India’s nuclear programme had stated that the country has the capability to build a bomb within a few months. This could be intended for domestic politics consideration, but, it does indicate that India had maintained a dual purpose nuclear programme from the very beginning. Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1998), 62-63.

1964, it did not create any urgency in India to respond even though its relationship with Beijing had deteriorated due to a border skirmish in 1962.

Despite an early start, India tested its first nuclear device in 1974, which was ten years after the first Chinese test and labelled it as a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE), since there was no credible justification for it to develop nuclear weapons capability. It took another 24 years for India to formally declare itself as a nuclear weapon state in 1998 by claiming it to be the right of one-sixth of humanity⁹ and a recognition of the Hindu civilisation.¹⁰ While China was not actually the main reason, it was cited as one in official communications to justify India's action.¹¹

India's present fixation towards China helps it to build its image of a credible rival while de-hyphenating its nuclear equation with Pakistan. This Indian dilemma is best explained by Robert Kaplan:

[India's] very competition and fixation with China forms an element of this escape [from geography]. India's rivalry with China is not like the one with Pakistan at all: it is more abstract, less emotional, and (far more significantly) less volatile. And it is a rivalry with no real history behind it.¹²

⁹ Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, "Statement to Parliament by Prime Minister Vajpayee" (speech, New Delhi, May 27, 1998), Acronym Institute, <http://www.acronym.org.uk/old/archive/spind.htm>.

¹⁰ Chidanand Rajghatta, "The Hindu Bomb," *Indian Express*, May 21, 1998.

¹¹ While India may have cited China as the main reason in its official documents post-1998, the 1974 tests, and subsequent attempts to test in 1995-96, was never blamed on Beijing. In fact, the 1995-96 preparations were due to CTBT negotiations that had the potential to permanently freeze India's option of conducting a test. Blaming the deteriorating security environment on Pakistan due to its Ghauri test and China, was meant to pacify the US objections. See recent articles about Narasimha Rao's biography that outlines the role of successive Indian leadership to make the country a nuclear weapon state, but China did not figure in their discussions. This has been a post-1998 tactic. See, Sridhar Acharyulu, "Modi Could Take a Leaf out of Narasimha Rao's Book on Statesmanship," *Wire*, April 7, 2019, <https://thewire.in/politics/modi-narasimha-rao-pokhran-asat>.

¹² Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), 251.

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As India grows in size and capacity, it could emerge as a strong regional competitor, but China-India relations are likely to be guided more by economic interests than military rivalry. The two Asian economic powers have had bilateral trade of over USD 84 billion¹³ since 2017 with potential for further expansion, and both understand the implications of engaging in a military conflict for resolving their border disputes.

Pakistan

In contrast to the other two regional nuclear weapon states, Pakistan's nuclear pursuit was driven by its fear of existential threat from India. The 1971 war that led to the dismemberment of Pakistan and India's nuclear test of 1974 were the two major factors that shaped the former's strategic thinking and pushed it towards the nuclear weapons path. Pakistan's reliance on nuclear weapons continues to increase as a result of deteriorating regional security environment and growing conventional imbalance between the two South Asia states that have a long history of outstanding disputes and mistrust.

Post-1998, both India and Pakistan have experienced a number of military crises and nuclear weapons played an important role in deterring a major war in the region. None of these crises involved China. This brings out an important conclusion that while military developments by each of the three countries influence ongoing regional competition, the deterrence relationship is 'not' triangular in nature; instead it is a set of two distinctly different dyads with the China-India dyad driven mainly by political competition and India-Pakistan dyad shaped by security compulsions.

Deterrence Dynamics in South Asia

India and Pakistan fought three wars before they formally declared themselves as nuclear-weapon states (1948, 1965 and 1971). After overt nuclearisation in 1998, there has been a series of military crises but none of these ended in a major war. This could be attributed to a commonly understood phenomenon known as the stability-instability paradox — if there is stability at the strategic level, there could be an inducement for

¹³ "India-China Bilateral Trade Hits Historic High of \$84.44 Billion in 2017," *Times of India*, March 7, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-china-bilateral-trade-hits-historic-high-of-84-44-billion-in-2017/articleshow/63202401.cms>.

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either of the antagonists to engage in a limited or a sub-conventional conflict.

There is, however, no tangible evidence to substantiate this hypothesis which requires a review of post-1998 military crises on epistemological grounds — to help understand the dynamics of different deterrence models that were at play during these crises, and how new technological developments and concepts could shape the future dyadic deterrence relationship between India and Pakistan.

1986-87 (Operation Brasstacks)

The crises started when India mobilised its forces under the cover of a military exercise labelled as ‘Exercise Brasstacks’. Pakistan viewed the military manoeuvres as threatening and an attempt by India to launch a major military offensive across the international border. In response, Pakistan signalled the possibility of nuclear use and the concept of nuclear deterrence was introduced for the first time in the India-Pakistan deterrence dyad, as a balancing factor, in an otherwise asymmetrical operational environment.¹⁴ It is not clear whether Pakistan had the capability to deliver a nuclear device since it had only conducted cold tests of its early weapon designs between 1983-84,¹⁵ but it was able to successfully deter India that had the conventional military advantage and had tested a nuclear weapon in 1974. It could, therefore, be concluded that India’s attempt to use its overall military posture as a compellence strategy during this crisis was countered by Pakistan through the ‘deterrence by punishment’ model.

1999 (Kargil Conflict)

The 1999 Kargil conflict was the first major crisis after nuclearisation of the region in 1998. The crisis was triggered when Pakistan attempted to regain control of strategic posts along the Line of Control (LoC), and India responded swiftly by mobilising its military, and most significantly, the deployment of its Air Force. Consequently, the situation escalated, and the

¹⁴ Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, “Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control” (speech, London, February 6, 2020), Strategic Foresight for Asia, <https://strafasia.com/gen-kidwai-speech-iiss-ciss-workshop-london-6-february-2020/>.

¹⁵ Hasan Askari Rizvi, “Pakistan’s Nuclear Testing,” *Asian Survey* 41, no. 6 (2001): 945, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2001.41.6.943>.

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international community was forced to intervene to help dissipate the crisis between the two recently declared nuclear-weapon states.

Many observers have termed the Kargil crisis a result of stability-instability paradox. This, however, may not necessarily be the case as both countries had just declared themselves as nuclear-weapon states and were still on a nuclear learning trajectory. It is, therefore, difficult to comprehend that either of the two were in a position to experiment with the Cold War construct of stability-instability paradox within the first year of their overt nuclearisation.

Pakistan's attempt to occupy strategic posts across the LoC did not necessarily stem from the confidence that nuclear weapons would help limit the conflict. This was an annual ritual from both the sides since 1984 when India had occupied the 1000 sq. kms of Siachen territory, and both militaries would find an opportune time to dislodge each other. While the nuclear capability was not the main catalyst for the Kargil crisis, it did, nevertheless, help prevent further escalation. It could, therefore, be stated that Pakistan's compellence strategy was countered by India's asymmetric response which also included the use of its air power to deny further incentive for Pakistan to escalate.

2001-02 (Military Stand-Off)

This was the second major crisis within three years of nuclearisation of the region triggered by an attack on the Indian Parliament by a group of non-state actors. India blamed Pakistan and threatened to launch a major military offensive. In response, Pakistan also mobilised its military and signalled the possibility of nuclear use in case India decided to launch an attack across the international border.¹⁶

Unlike the previous crisis, both countries had sufficient nuclear delivery means to inflict unacceptable damage upon each other. The 2001-02 crisis, therefore, could be viewed as the first real test of nuclear deterrence in South Asia, where a conventionally superior state was unable to exploit its military advantage against its adversary to achieve military

¹⁶ Rahul Roy Chaudhury, "Nuclear Doctrine, Declaratory Policy, and Escalation Control," (paper, Stimson Center, 2004), <https://www.stimson.org/2004/nuclear-doctrine-declaratory-policy-and-escalation-control/>.

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and political objectives. India's compellence was, therefore, overridden by Pakistan's 'deterrence by punishment' model.

2008 (Mumbai Crisis)

The crisis was triggered when a small group of militants attacked a hotel in Mumbai and few other adjacent buildings causing significant human loss. Once again India blamed Pakistan for supporting the militants and threatened to launch aerial surgical strikes across the international border as a punitive measure against targets that it claimed were headquarters of the militant organisations responsible for the attack. Pakistan responded by mobilising its Air Force promising a matching response, which may have deterred India. During this crisis, nuclear weapons did not play a direct role, but their presence did influence the behaviour of both the neighbours. India also exploited its diplomatic and military advantage as a compellence tool to force Pakistan to take certain actions. Pakistan, on the other hand, appears to have used the deterrence by denial model by mobilising its Air Force to deny the incentive for India to launch surgical strikes across the international border.

2019 (Balakot Crisis)

The 2019 'Balakot crisis' was triggered by a suicide attack on February 14 by a young Kashmiri resident from the Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJ&K) that resulted into the killing of almost 40 personnel from India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). India blamed Pakistan within hours of the attack and vowed to take revenge. Twelve days later, on February 26, India launched what it termed a 'non-military' aerial surgical strike across the LoC allegedly against militant facilities. It claimed destroying several buildings and killing more than 350 militants present in a religious seminary.

Pakistan retaliated with its own 'tit-for-tat' kind of a surgical strike, as part of its new doctrine of 'Quid Pro Quo Plus'¹⁷ and avoided hitting India's military installations to prevent escalation. In an ensuing aerial

¹⁷ Adil Sultan, "India's Surgical Strike Doctrine: Implications for South Asian Strategic Stability," *Strategic Foresight for Asia*, February 26, 2020, <https://strafasia.com/indias-surgical-strike-doctrine-implications-for-south-asian-strategic-stability/>.

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encounter, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) managed to shoot down two Indian Air Force aircrafts. One aircraft fell inside Pakistan's side of the LoC and the pilot of the MiG-21 was captured.

While the crisis had not yet subsided, Pakistan intercepted India's conventional submarine closer to its territorial waters¹⁸ which was part of India's naval assets deployed in the Arabian Sea, and included the nuclear-capable *Arihant* submarine.¹⁹ The *Arihant* that can carry cannisterised nuclear missiles was a serious escalatory measure, possibly aimed at deterring Pakistan from contemplating the early use of nuclear weapons in case India decided to escalate the crisis. There is also a possibility that the Indian decision-makers were contemplating the use of their 'Second-Strike' platform for launching a 'First-Strike' against Pakistan.²⁰

During the Balakot crisis, India also threatened the use of its conventional missiles,²¹ compelling Pakistan to reciprocate by threatening a retaliatory missile strike. It was not clear whether the missiles that India had deployed were conventional or nuclear. However, since both countries do not maintain a clear distinction between the two, therefore, any such deployment could be construed as nuclear by the other side.

The crisis eventually dissipated due to a number of reasons with no direct role played by nuclear weapons, but the influence of nuclear weapons on decision-making on both sides cannot be completely neglected. During the crisis, India used its Air Force as a coercive military tool and as a compellence strategy. Pakistan, by responding proactively and causing significant damage to India's military pride, denied the incentive for India to further escalate. It could, therefore, be concluded that during the Balakot

¹⁸ Naveed Siddiqui, "Pakistan Navy Foils an Attempt by Indian Submarine to Enter Pakistani Waters," *Dawn*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1467778>.

¹⁹ Vishnu Som, "India Deployed Nuclear Missile-Armed Submarine during Standoff with Pak," *NDTV*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-deployed-nuclear-missile-armed-submarine-during-standoff-with-pakistan-2009178>.

²⁰ Kidwai, "Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control."

²¹ "India, Pakistan Came Close to Firing Missiles at Each Other on February 27," *Hindustan Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-pakistan-came-close-to-firing-missiles-at-each-other-on-february-27/story-rVsBjZ5qmxXMprktzDNqcM.html>.

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crisis India's compellence was overridden by Pakistan's 'deterrence by denial' strategy.

Key Lessons Learnt from Past Crises

Some of the lessons that could be drawn from the past military crises between India and Pakistan and could be useful to understand the role of nuclear weapons in maintaining strategic stability in the region include:

- Nuclear weapons have limited the possibility of a major conflict (1986-87 crisis and the 2001-02 military stand-off).
- Non-state actors have the potential to trigger a crisis (1999, 2001-02, 2008 and 2019).
- Possibility of limited conflict or limited strikes across the LoC remains a possibility for both countries, but it could risk unintended escalation to an all-out war (1999 and 2019).
- Except for the 1999 crisis, India has been using its military superiority as a compellence tool to achieve political objectives but without risking a major conflict.
- Pakistan can afford to maintain 'deterrence by denial' model against sub-conventional or limited military conflicts (2008 and 2019), but is likely to increase its reliance on 'deterrence by punishment' model to counter any major military offensive (1986-87 and 2001-02), especially if in the future conventional military balance continues to shift in India's favour.

Table-1

India-Pakistan Military Crises and Nuclear Deterrence

Year of Crisis	India	Pakistan
1986-87 (Brasstacks)	Compellence	Deterrence by Punishment
1999 (Kargil Conflict)	Deterrence by Denial	Compellence
2001-02 (Military Stand-off)	Compellence	Deterrence by Punishment
2008 (Mumbai Crisis)	Compellence	Deterrence by Denial
2019 (Balakot Crisis)	Compellence	Deterrence by Denial
Future Crisis*	Compellence	Deterrence by Punishment

Source: Author's own.

* There is a growing resonance within India about the possibility of a comprehensive counterforce 'first-strike' to deny Pakistan using its nuclear weapons. This may force the latter to increase its reliance on 'deterrence by punishment' in a future crisis with India.

Evolving Doctrines in South Asia

India's CSD vs Pakistan's FSD

An important conclusion that came out of the 2001-02 India-Pakistan military crisis was that war became an unthinkable option between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. The Indian Army, however, interpreted it differently, and in 2004, introduced a new concept of fighting a limited war without crossing Pakistan's 'perceived' strategic nuclear threshold.²² This was labelled as the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) and its existence was

²² Prakash Menon, *The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan under the Nuclear Shadow*, (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2018), xiv-xv.

formally recognised by the Indian Army Chief in January 2017.²³ The CSD is based on a premise that limited incursions by Indian troops inside Pakistan's territory may not trigger a nuclear response, thus, providing space below Pakistan's strategic threshold for conventional punitive strikes. This new warfighting doctrine posited a dilemma for Pakistan — retaliating massively against limited military incursions could be considered as a disproportionate response, and not responding at all would discredit the country's deterrence posture.

To address this credibility dilemma, Pakistan introduced Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) — also known as Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs). The SRBMs, combined with other strategic weapons, were formally declared as part of Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) posture, introduced in 2013, and which aims to cater for the entire spectrum of threats ranging from a limited to an all-out war.²⁴ FSD is not a 'quantitative' shift from the Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) posture,²⁵ but a 'qualitative' response configured to deal with the relatively new threat of a limited conventional military offensive, besides deterring a major war.

Over the past few years, the FSD posture seems to have undergone some transformation due to evolving threat perception and the introduction of new technologies by both India and Pakistan. In a recent 2020 speech, Lt. Gen. Kidwai, former Head of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD) described the FSD posture as comprising of 'a large variety of strategic, operational and tactical nuclear weapons, on land, air and sea, which are designed to comprehensively deter large scale aggression against mainland Pakistan.'²⁶ This relatively new description includes Pakistan's sea-based

²³ Ajai Shukla, "Army Chief Says Military Must Prepare for Cold Start," *Business Standard*, January 14, 2017, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/army-chief-says-military-must-prepare-for-cold-start-117011301174_1.html.

²⁴ Adil Sultan, "South Asian Stability-Instability Paradox: Another Perspective," *IPRI Journal* XIV, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 21-37 (34), <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Article-no.-2-dr.-Adil.pdf>.

²⁵ Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, "Defence, Deterrence and Stability in South Asia" (speech, Islamabad, December 6, 2017), Center for International Strategic Studies, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PsbLf0snoc>.

²⁶ Kidwai, "Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control."

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capability that it is in the process of developing. This also narrows the focus to deterring a ‘large scale’ aggression, instead of the earlier formulation that was aimed at deterring the full spectrum of threats starting from a limited to an all-out war with India. With this shift in focus towards deterring mainly a large-scale aggression, Pakistan may have to find the relevance of its TNWs that were originally introduced for a specific purpose of deterring India’s CSD.

Exploiting the Stability-Instability Paradox

During the last military crisis of 2019, India did not operationalise its CSD and instead opted for a new strategy of a ‘non-military pre-emptive’ surgical strike.²⁷ The fear of nuclear retribution may have deterred India, but there is also a possibility that despite making heavy investments and regularly exercising its limited war-fighting concept, India still does not have much faith in its CSD, as a credible strategy against Pakistan.²⁸

After the February 2019 crisis, India declared that its new strategy of surgical strikes would be a ‘new normal’²⁹ without offering an explanation to what happened to its earlier CSD/ Proactive Operations (PAOs) strategy that was intended to deal with similar kind of contingencies. Claiming the 2019 aerial surgical strike to be a success, some commentators were of the view that India may have called Pakistan’s nuclear bluff,³⁰ since the latter did not resort to the threat of using nuclear weapons. These statements seem to be a cover-up for India’s failure to respond that was mainly a result of lack of resolve at the senior decision-making level.

Pakistan’s FSD posture was never intended to deter a one-off surgical strike, and it would have been unrealistic to expect that it would

²⁷ “India’s ‘Non-Military Pre-Emptive’ Strike on Pakistan: What We Know, What We Don’t Know,” *Wire*, February 26, 2019, <https://thewire.in/security/iaf-airstrikes-in-pakistan-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know>.

²⁸ Kidwai “Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control.”

²⁹ Gopalan Balachandran, “Will India’s ‘New Normal’ Action against Pakistan Pay Dividends?” *Wire*, March 9, 2019, <https://thewire.in/security/india-pakistan-terrorism-new-normal>.

³⁰ Rajeshwari Rajagopalan, “India-Pakistan Dynamics after Balakot: A Different Deterrence Equation,” *South Asian Voices*, March 20, 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/india-pakistan-dynamics-after-balakot-a-different-deterrence-equation/>.

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have retaliated with nuclear weapons in response to a botched surgical strike,³¹ especially once it had credible responses against sub-conventional operations as part of its relatively new conventional doctrine of ‘Quid Pro Quo Plus.’³² The successful counter aerial strike that demonstrated Pakistan’s capacity to deal with such contingencies helped restore the credibility of its conventional deterrence in an asymmetrical environment, besides validating the salience of nuclear deterrence in South Asia, where the existence of stability-instability paradox continues to be exploited by a conventionally superior India to achieve its limited political objectives.

India’s NFU-First Use/ First-Strike Puzzle

India’s Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) of 1999 offered unconditional No First Use (NFU) commitment, but the subsequent press release of January 2003, which is considered as the official doctrine, made NFU conditional by stating: India reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons if attacked by chemical or biological weapons.³³ Despite this caveat, most Indian officials insist that there is no change in India’s NFU stance. Some former senior military officials are of the view that the promise of nuclear retaliation, in response to the use of chemical and biological weapons, is not contrary to their NFU position.³⁴

Over the past few years, the controversy surrounding India’s NFU commitment has become murkier after controversial statements made by several senior Indian officials. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Nagal, former Commander of India’s Strategic Forces, believes that strategic deterrence can follow a policy of First Use and advised that ‘strategies and supporting systems that complement this policy must be implemented and made functional on the

³¹ “Balakot Air Strike: Pakistan Shows off Disputed Site on Eve of Indian Election,” *BBC.com*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47882354>.

³² Kidwai “Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control.”

³³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Operationalization of India’s Nuclear Doctrine,” press release, January 4, 2003.

³⁴ Prakash Menon (@prakashmenon51), Twitter post, January 20, 2019, 5:07 AM., <https://twitter.com/prakashmenon51/status/1086852609212854277>.

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ground.³⁵ India's former National Security Advisor (NSA) also indicated that under certain situations, India might find it useful to strike first, especially if there is a 'threat of use of nuclear weapons by the adversary.'³⁶ The country's former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, while he was still in office and a member of India's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) also questioned the utility of maintaining an NFU posture.³⁷

These contradictory statements further complicate India's doctrinal puzzle when two distinct concepts such as 'First-Strike' and 'First Use' are conflated to explain its doctrinal thinking. In the nuclear lexicon, as is generally understood from the Cold War period nuclear competition, each phrase has a specific interpretation to bring clarity in communication. 'First Use' generally involves use of nuclear weapons (such as battlefield use of TNWs) or could be intended to signal the resolve to do so, and discourage the adversary from further escalation, and if used in self-defence, it may have some legitimacy. 'First-Strike', on the other hand, would be a 'bolt from the blue' surprise attack to degrade or neutralise an adversary's capacity to retaliate. Since it could be a pre-emptive strike, it could fall under the purview of aggression and, thus, would be considered as illegitimate.³⁸

Unlike India, Pakistan has not given an NFU commitment, but at the same time, has not clearly stated that it will be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. This deliberate ambiguity is intended mainly to deter India from contemplating its CSD and prevent even a limited military conflict. The signalling from the Indian side, however, suggests that India may have given up on its NFU commitment and could contemplate a

³⁵ A.K. Singh and B.S. Nagal, eds., *Military Strategy for India in the 21st Century* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2019), 218.

³⁶ Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 110.

³⁷ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Why Bind Ourselves to 'No First Use Policy', Says Manohar Parrikar on India's Nuke Doctrine," *Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/why-bind-ourselves-to-no-first-use-policy-says-parrikar-on-indias-nuke-doctrine/articleshow/55357808.cms>.

³⁸ Adil Sultan, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: A Case of Strategic Dissonance or Deliberate Ambiguity," *IPRI Journal* XVIII, no.2 (2018): 38-39, <https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.180202>.

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‘comprehensive first-strike against Pakistan.’³⁹ Nevertheless, India does not have the numbers and the requisite I²SR (Information, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capability to carry out a decapitating ‘First-Strike’ against Pakistan. India may eventually develop its potential for such a strike, but the recent statements from the senior leadership could possibly be intended to embed deliberate ambiguity about its NFU commitment and retain the option of a pre-emptive ‘First-Strike’, aimed at creating space for the CSD, while deterring Pakistan from contemplating the early use of its TNWs.

Pakistan does not believe in India’s NFU commitment. Recent controversy generated by India’s own strategic elite has further made it difficult to take New Delhi’s doctrinal postulations to be credible. Whether India would actually contemplate a ‘First-Strike’ against Pakistan, or not, but this ambiguity could push Pakistan to take countermeasures for ensuring that the credibility of its deterrence posture is not compromised.

Emerging Technologies and Deterrence Stability in South Asia

India is in the process of developing a missile shield and pursuing its ambition to join the group of countries developing Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs). It has also demonstrated its capability to shoot down satellites in an apparent attempt to gain space supremacy over Pakistan and to bring parity vis à vis China which tested a similar system earlier. India’s missile defence shield consists of three layers: the indigenous Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system comprising of *Prithvi* Air Defence System; the Russian supplied S-400 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system; and the Integrated Air Defence Weapon System (IADWS) being acquired from the US. Such diverse systems integrated into one national missile defence system could bring in operational complexities, and may not necessarily be effective, but it could provide a false sense of protection against a retaliatory strike from Pakistan, thus, encouraging India’s decision-makers to contemplate a pre-emptive ‘First-Strike’ option.

Given India-Pakistan’s environment, no BMD system is likely to work efficiently due to geographical and technical limitations. Nevertheless, to deny India’s advantage, Pakistan introduced its Multiple

³⁹ Menon, *Choices*, 117.

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Independently Targetable Re-Entry Vehicle (MIRV)⁴⁰ system and cruise missiles, which makes it more difficult for any BMD to guarantee complete immunity from the incoming missiles.

In 2019, New Delhi also tested its Anti-Satellite (ASAT) missile by shooting one of its own satellites into space.⁴¹ The acquisition of this new capability has made India the fourth country capable of shooting down space-based assets, and has pushed the region towards nuclear entanglement with nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities becoming dangerously intertwined.⁴² In a future conflict, India could use its ASAT capability to target Pakistan's Nuclear Command and Control system (NC2). This may force Pakistan to take measures like developing its own ASAT capability that could provide effective and credible deterrent, and deny any incentive to its adversary to contemplate blanketing the communication system or the nuclear C2 system. This would inevitably lead to an arms competition in space with implications for South Asia's deterrence stability.

India is also developing HGVs by modifying the Russian supplied *Brahmos* missiles which would give it an edge as these systems have the capability to penetrate missile defences and target mobile ground-based missiles. It is not yet certain whether India would equip these missiles with conventional or nuclear warheads, but the HGVs have the potential to be used for surgical strikes against Pakistan besides being employed in a counterforce role to target *Nasr* SRBMs and other land-based missiles. Due to their speed and limited reaction time, the use of HGVs could add pressure on the adversary to keep its nuclear weapons on a higher alert status to avoid 'use or lose dilemma.' This could lead to miscalculation amongst

⁴⁰ Zachary Keck, "Pakistan Has Just Tested the Ultimate Nuclear Missile," *National Interest*, March 9, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/pakistan-has-just-tested-the-ultimate-nuclear-missile-24834>.

⁴¹ Ashley J. Tellis, "India's ASAT Test: An Incomplete Test," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 15, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/15/india-s-asat-test-incomplete-success-pub-78884>.

⁴² James M. Acton, "Why Is Nuclear Entanglement So Dangerous?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 23, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/23/why-is-nuclear-entanglement-so-dangerous-pub-78136>.

adversaries that have a long history of distrust and could, thus, undermine deterrence stability in South Asia.

Development of Second-Strike Capabilities

India conducted the first patrol of its nuclear-powered submarine *Arihant* in November 2018 with Prime Minister Modi terming it ‘a fitting response to those who indulge in nuclear blackmail’⁴³ — an obvious reference to Pakistan that continues to challenge India’s status of undisputed regional power. *Arihant* is first of a series of at least four SSBNs that India plans to build over the next several years. It will be followed by a bigger class submarine under Project S-5,⁴⁴ which will enable the country to claim credible second-strike capability.

The *Arihant*, with its existing missile range of 750 km., does not have the capability to target Pakistan’s major cities in the North, and can definitely not reach mainland China. India’s future SSBNs, therefore, are designed to carry missiles that would be able to reach targets that are more than 6000 km away, but it could take another 50-60 years before India is able to claim a credible deterrent against China.⁴⁵

In response to these developments, Pakistan is also in the process of developing its own version of a second-strike capability, and announced the creation of its Naval Strategic Command in 2012.⁴⁶ In January 2017, Pakistan tested its nuclear-capable Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile

⁴³ Rajat Pandit, “Nuclear Submarine INS Arihant Completes Patrol, Country’s N-Triad Operational,” *Times of India*, November 6, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/as-nuclear-sub-arihant-returns-after-first-deterrence-patrol-indias-nuclear-triad-complete/articleshow/66515624.cms>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Yogesh Joshi, “Angles and Dangles; Arihant and the Dilemma of India’s Undersea Nuclear Weapons,” *War on the Rocks*, January 14, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/angles-and-dangles-arihant-and-the-dilemma-of-indias-undersea-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁴⁶ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), “Naval Chief Inaugurates Naval Strategic Force Headquarters,” press release, May 19, 2012, <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=2067>.

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(SLCM) *Babur-3* that has a limited range of 450 km,⁴⁷ and is likely to be enhanced in the future so as to credibly threaten India's main cities.

A second-strike, with both nuclear-armed neighbours, could be stabilising due to mutual vulnerability. If only one of the two antagonists has this capability, it may provide incentive to the possessor to launch a pre-emptive first-strike, while having the assurance that second-strike capability would be able to deter the adversary from retaliating. During the 2019 crisis, India deployed the *Arihant* SSBN without even mobilising its land or air-based nuclear weapons, thus, leading to the possibility that it might have contemplated the use of its second-strike platform for launching a first-strike against Pakistan.⁴⁸ Whether it was intended for signalling, with or without the political authority, it may encourage Pakistan to take into consideration the possibility of India's sea-based nuclear capability being used for a pre-emptive first-strike in a future crisis.

Conclusion

The 2019 Balakot crisis once again brought into focus the role of nuclear weapons in maintaining strategic stability in South Asia. Contrary to the general misperception, as a result of distorted national narratives, the Balakot crisis has brought to light some important lessons for the future of India-Pakistan's deterrence relationship.

One, nuclear weapons would continue to play a major role in preventing a major conflict, but these weapons are not a panacea for every military contingency. Two, despite the military disadvantage, Pakistan was able to restore the credibility of its conventional deterrence against an adversary that enjoys significant conventional superiority. Three, the new concept of a 'surgical strike' may have reinforced the notion of stability-instability paradox, while also highlighting the dangers of introducing innovative concepts in a politically charged environment which may eventually become counterproductive and could lead to uncontrolled escalation. Finally, the introduction of new technologies will continue to

⁴⁷ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), press release, January 9, 2017, <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=3672>.

⁴⁸ Kidwai, "Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control."

strain the limits of strategic stability, but is not likely to fundamentally alter the deterrence equilibrium in the near future.

Analysis of past India-Pakistan crises is useful to understand the evolving deterrence models, and how the growing military imbalance, and other variables could affect any future crisis between the two countries. India, due to its military advantage has been using it as a ‘compellence’ tool to achieve its desired political objectives. So far, Pakistan has generally opted for the ‘deterrence by denial’ model to reduce incentive for India to launch a major military offensive. As conventional asymmetry grows, Pakistan could be forced to rely more on the ‘deterrence by punishment’ model. It could lead to lowering of the nuclear threshold, and increase the possibility of miscalculation from either side.

The article has also challenged the notion that the India-Pakistan-China relationship is ‘triangular’ in nature, and argues that the ongoing competition is at best a set of two different and asymmetric dyads. This distinction is important to understand the impact of ongoing military modernisation in the region which India projects to be against China, but may only affect the India-Pakistan security equation, and not necessarily the India-China dyad.

South Asia continues to remain the most unstable region due to a long history of wars and military conflicts. The regional security dynamics were compounded after the introduction of nuclear weapons and the involvement of outside powers. Both India and Pakistan are modernising their military potential for distinctly different purposes, and have indicated the propensity to entangle quite often in military conflicts that could eventually lead to a deterrence breakdown. This would have consequences for the region as well as for international security.

This article, therefore, makes an attempt to differentiate between the real and the perceived causes that are inadvertently leading towards enhanced military competition. These developments may serve India’s parochial interests, but could also push the region towards instability. There is, therefore, an urgent need to understand the fragility of South Asian deterrence stability and support efforts that could dissuade, and not encourage, the two regional adversaries from getting entangled into another military crisis — the outcome of which may not necessarily be limited,

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but, could quickly lead to a major war with serious consequences for regional as well as international security.■