

Nuclear Doctrine, Declaratory Policy, and Escalation Control

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Official channels of communication between India and Pakistan were fatally disrupted during the ten-month long military mobilization in 2001-02. New Delhi deliberately downgraded its relations with Islamabad by withdrawing India's High Commissioner to Pakistan, and by halving the strength of Pakistan's diplomatic mission. Pakistan followed suit. This increased the dependence of both states on public diplomacy and rhetoric as the most significant channel of bilateral communication. Such a state of affairs, with inherent possibilities of misperceptions and miscalculations, has dangerous implications for two nuclear-armed states.

During much of the border confrontation, India and Pakistan were communicating with each other on a public basis to convey as well as to assess intent and capabilities i.e. operational readiness of forces. Both countries attempted to send "signals" on nuclear as well as conventional matters by their public statements or deafening silences, by the issuance of provocative and inflammatory statements, and by subsequent denials or clarifications. These signals were multiple in nature, carried out at multiple levels, and addressed to multiple constituencies – internal, regional, and international. For both India and Pakistan, the most important constituencies were the domestic public, each other, and the United States, which had the most influence in the region. New Delhi wanted the United States to help pressurize Pakistan to cease cross-border infiltration of militants into Indian-administered Kashmir. Islamabad wanted the United States to restrain New Delhi from taking military action.

Although India attempted to convey clear messages, its nuclear signals appeared confusing and, at times, were at cross-purposes with one another. It is also not clear whether these signals were even perceived as intended by Pakistan or by other parties. If they were, it is not clear whether they were fully understood, or even taken cognizance of, especially by Pakistan. This essay examines the challenges and complexities of India's nuclear signaling during the 2001-02 border confrontation.

DISRUPTION OF DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATIONS

Soon after the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, New Delhi began attempting to coerce Islamabad into complying with its

demands, and ending cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and in other parts of India. On December 14, New Delhi issued a verbal warning to Pakistan seeking action against the activities of two Pakistan-based terrorist organizations – Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) – identified by Indian intelligence agencies as being responsible for the attack on parliament. This was followed by another warning on December 31 seeking the return of twenty fugitives wanted by New Delhi, believed to be living in Pakistan.

As part of its “coercive diplomacy” against Pakistan, India launched Operation *Parakram* (valor) on December 19, which was to constitute the largest and longest mobilization of the Indian armed forces. This was a deliberate move, taking place amidst the Global War on Terrorism, to threaten the use of force against Pakistan. It included the deployment of India’s three strike corps (comprising armored and mechanized formations) at forward positions on the international border with Pakistan. All leave to armed forces personnel was restricted, and all training programs and military courses suspended. With Pakistan’s counter-mobilization, nearly one million armed personnel were deployed across the Indo-Pakistan border.

In order to further increase pressure on Islamabad, New Delhi systematically began to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Pakistan, along with the ending of all transportation and communication linkages. On December 14, the day after the attack on parliament, New Delhi sought the immediate recall of its High Commissioner in Islamabad, Vijay Nambiar, along with the termination of all bus and train services between the two countries, to be effective from January 1, 2002. While it was widely expected that Pakistan would reciprocate by recalling its High Commissioner in New Delhi, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, it did not do so. In an astute move that transferred the onus of responsibility for his withdrawal on New Delhi, Qazi remained High Commissioner to India for the next four months, even though he was deliberately ignored by the Indian government during this period.

In continuation of its policy of coercive diplomacy, on December 21, 2001, India ordered the reduction of the strength of the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi by half within forty-eight hours, and restricted the movement of Pakistani diplomats in New Delhi. It also banned all over-flight of Indian territory by Pakistani aircraft from January 1, 2002. Within an hour, Pakistan announced reciprocal diplomatic measures, including the reduction of the strength of the Indian High Commission in Pakistan, and restrictions on the movement of Indian diplomats in Islamabad. On May 18, 2002, Pakistani High Commissioner Qazi was finally asked to leave India, in the wake of the terrorist attack in Kaluchak, near the city of Jammu. The Indian Government told Pakistan to recall Qazi within a week, “for sake of parity.”¹ By early January 2002, both the Indian and Pakistani High Commissions were operating on a

¹ “PM reviews situation, military option open,” *The Times of India*, May 19, 2002.

skeletal staff and all transportation links between the two countries were cut off, amidst the growing military mobilization of armed forces personnel.

Although Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf met twice during the border confrontation at multilateral summits – the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Kathmandu in January 6-7, 2002, and the sixteen-nation Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures (CICA) at Almaty, Kazakhstan, on June 3-4 - tensions did not ease. Indeed, according to the Indian National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, the five-minute Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting in Kathmandu was merely “a replay of the Agra Summit” of 2001 (where Vajpayee and Musharraf failed to agree on the “core” issues of tension between the two states).²

NUCLEAR SIGNALING, PAST AND PRESENT

In view of these developments, it was not surprising that nuclear signaling by both New Delhi and Islamabad was unprecedented – in terms of the duration as well as the variety and multiple levels at which the signals emanated. The ten-month border confrontation was the longest period of military mobilization by both countries since their independence in 1947. Nuclear signaling took place by means of flight tests of ballistic missiles, speeches directed to the public and to the armed forces, and press briefings. These signals were conveyed at multiple levels by the political, military, and bureaucratic leadership.

During the Kargil conflict of May-July 1999, nuclear signaling by Islamabad was restrained. This appears to have been due, in part, to Indian military action being limited to its own side of the Line of Control (the *de facto* border dividing Indian and Pakistan-administered Kashmir), which signaled restraint in the use of force. The official Indian post-conflict review - the Kargil Review Committee Report of December 15, 1999 – reveals that Pakistan conveyed only “veiled” nuclear signals to India during the conflict.³ However, in May 2002, a former senior Clinton administration official publicly alleged that Pakistan was preparing its nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles for possible deployment in July 1999.⁴ Since New Delhi may not have been aware of such a move, it did not impact upon the situation on the ground.

² Interview of Brajesh Mishra, National Security Adviser and Principal Secretary of India, NDTV, May 17, 2003, available at

<http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fname=brajesh&fodname=20030526&sid=1>.

³ The Kargil Review Committee, *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 243.

⁴ Bruce Riedel, “American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House,” available at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/casi>; and Strobe Talbot, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2004), p. 161.

Prior to the 1998 nuclear tests, there were two prior instances of nuclear signaling - during the spring 1990 Indo-Pakistan military crisis and during India's "Brasstacks" military exercise in 1987. In 1990, Pakistan is believed to have made an "implied" nuclear threat to India, although Robert Gates, then Assistant to the President and Deputy for National Security Affairs, did not make any reference to this nuclear signal during his mission to India in May 1990. During the Brasstacks exercise, Pakistan conveyed two nuclear signals to India - quietly through diplomatic channels to India's High Commissioner in Islamabad, S.K. Singh, and publicly through Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, its chief nuclear scientist, in an interview subsequently published after the end of the military exercise in the British *Observer* newspaper.

In an attempt to understand India's nuclear signals during the 2001-02 border confrontation - both in terms of conveying stated intentions, as well as in assessing respective intent and capabilities - it is best to examine them in three phases. The first phase can be defined as the period between the terrorist attack on parliament on December 13, 2001 and the attack on the Army residential camp in Kaluchak on May 14, 2002; the second phase covers the post-Kaluchak period till the end of the crisis in mid-June 2002; and the final phase from Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's claim of victory without war on June 17, 2002 to his "hand of friendship" speech in Srinagar on April 18, 2003.

NUCLEAR SIGNALING, PHASE I: DECEMBER 13, 2001 - MAY 14, 2002

These five months start in the immediate aftermath of the December 13 attack, when, according to the Indian National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, New Delhi came close to using force against Pakistan.⁵ This period comprised half the total duration of the border confrontation and military mobilization between India and Pakistan. During this period, New Delhi appeared keen to give two major signals to its domestic public, the Pakistani government, and Washington. First, that its much-publicized threat to use conventional force against Pakistan was real and credible, with limits to its restraint and patience fast approaching - unless Pakistan complied with its demands to end cross-border terrorism. Second, that it would strenuously avoid any nuclear signaling to Islamabad, as well as deliberately ignore any nuclear signals emanating from Islamabad. New Delhi was only too aware that since the early 1990s, Pakistan had been attempting to link the Kashmir dispute to nuclear weapons in a political manner. It was not felt that this crisis would be any different. By highlighting Kashmir as a "nuclear flashpoint," Pakistan hoped to involve the international community in its resolution, which was largely opposed by India (with the exception of US involvement in facilitating the deal with Pakistan to withdraw its troops). Any Pakistani nuclear signaling during the confrontation was therefore to be seen by New Delhi as a political ploy to raise international concern over a nuclear war over Kashmir. By avoiding nuclear references in this

⁵ "Talking with Brajesh Mishra," *BBC HARDTalk*. Interview excerpts published in *Indian Express*, November 29, 2002.

crisis, New Delhi's intention was to convey the message that it could handle Pakistani adventurism by conventional means.

In the first official reaction to the December 13 terrorist attack, the Indian cabinet vowed to "liquidate the terrorists and their sponsors wherever they are, whoever they are," but without naming any state. Prime Minister Vajpayee also boldly stated, "now the fight against terrorism has reached its last phase. We will fight a decisive battle to the end," without going into specifics. Here, too, the focus seems to have been on fighting terrorism by conventional means.

Within two weeks of these events, New Delhi and Islamabad exchanged navigational coordinates of their nuclear installations and facilities on January 1, 2002, as they had done for the past thirteen years, in accordance with the bilateral agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities.⁶ Neither New Delhi nor Islamabad apparently felt it prudent to discontinue this existing confidence-building measure, (CBM), notwithstanding tense bilateral relations. Both apparently felt that continued notification was an easier option, as well as the most responsible one. This CBM is more demonstrative than substantive. It has no security implications of any significance, with both states deliberately continuing to neglect to notify each other of one nuclear-related facility each. Thus, continuing existing practices also sent mixed messages.

The announcement that Musharraf was preparing a televised address to the nation on January 12, 2002 was met with a sense of expectation in New Delhi for two reasons. First, that India's politico-military pressure could have begun to work, and second, that this could be reflected in Musharraf's speech, with Pakistan preparing to meet some of India's demands. Dressed in civilian clothing, and apparently reading from a handwritten text, Musharraf's speech attempted to cater to multiple audiences. Although New Delhi cautiously welcomed Musharraf's announcements (including the ban on five sectarian and *jihadi* organizations) as a "major shift" in Islamabad's policy, it was well aware that it fell short of the goals envisioned in its coercive diplomacy policy.⁷ In essence, Musharraf's promises needed to be implemented by "concrete action" on the ground.

The first nuclear signal emanating from Islamabad came from Pakistani President Musharraf's speech on the occasion of Pakistan's National Day on March 23, 2002. Not only was his speech seen in New Delhi as a reversal of his January 12 promises, but it was tinged with a warning to India of an "unforgettable lesson" if it dared to challenge Pakistan. The "unforgettable lesson" was seen as alluding to the use of Pakistani nuclear weapons to counter

⁶ This agreement was signed on December 31, 1988, by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

⁷ Atul Aneja, "Match words with action, India tells Pak.," *The Hindu*, January 14, 2002; and B. Muralidhar Reddy, "It is for India to act, says Musharraf," *The Hindu*, January 16, 2002.

an Indian conventional attack across the LoC. Although there was no official response to this nuclear signal by the Indian cabinet, Defense Minister George Fernandes criticized Musharraf's statement as "childish."⁸

Surprisingly, the second nuclear signal from Islamabad came at a time of relative calm along the Indo-Pakistan border. On April 6, 2003 the well-known German weekly newsmagazine, *Der Spiegel*, published an interview with Musharraf, quoting him as saying that in the event that pressure on Pakistan became too great, "as a last resort, the atom bomb is also possible." The sensational title of the interview, "Kaschmir konflikt: Pakistan's Musharraf droht Indien mit der Atombombe" (Kashmir Conflict: Musharraf of Pakistan threatens India with Nuclear Bomb) added to its impact. The translation of Musharraf's statement reads as follows: "Using nuclear weapons would only be a last resort for us. We are negotiating responsibly. And I am optimistic and confident that we can defend ourselves using conventional weapons...[O]nly if there is a threat of Pakistan being wiped off the map, then the pressure from my countrymen to use this option would be too great."⁹ Amidst much sensational international press coverage the following day, the spokesman of the Pakistani government clarified that Musharraf had actually said, "the use of nuclear weapons is only as a last resort, if all of Pakistan were threatened to disappear from the map."¹⁰

Significantly, Prime Minister Vajpayee publicly declined to comment on Musharraf's interview, stating, "I will not like to comment till I see the entire statement." Not surprisingly, Vajpayee never did respond to the *Der Spiegel* interview.

During this phase, the only exceptions to New Delhi's policy of avoiding all nuclear signaling, took place, perhaps inadvertently, with Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General S. Padmanabhan's press conference on January 11, 2002, and the flight-test of the *Agni I* ballistic missile on January 25, 2002. The day prior to Musharraf's much advertised address to the nation, General Padmanabhan called a press conference, ostensibly to brief the media on the high state of armed forces preparedness on the borders. At the press conference, he pointed out that the possibility of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan was in the "realm of the unknown," and that India had already declared that it would not be the first to use nuclear weapons. However, in response to a query from a journalist, Padmanabhan gave an unclear warning to Pakistan on nuclear war. He stated that India possessed the capability of a retaliatory strike and warned that if any country was "mad enough" to initiate a nuclear strike

⁸ See video clip available at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020326/nation.htm>.

⁹ See "Musharraf aims to reassure on nuclear danger," *Disarmament Diplomacy* 64 (May-June 2002).

¹⁰ "Pakistan clarifies threat to use nukes," *Rediff.com*, April 11, 2002, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/apr/10pak1.htm>.

against India, then “the perpetrator of that particular outrage shall be punished severely.”¹¹

This response was clearly contradictory to India’s unstated policy to refrain from nuclear signaling. Thus, within hours, in an unprecedented manner, Defense Minister George Fernandes publicly repudiated the “uncalled for concerns” caused by the Army Chief’s observations, much to the consternation of the armed forces. In a written statement, Fernandes pointed out that nuclear issues should not be handled “in a cavalier manner.”¹²

Within two weeks of George Fernandes’ statement, however, India flight-tested its medium-range *Agni* ballistic missile on January 25, 2002, on the eve of its Republic Day. Pakistan was provided advanced notification of the missile test (along with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council) in the spirit of the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).¹³ Nonetheless, it was clear that a nuclear-capable ballistic missile with special characteristics had been tested. Notwithstanding the statement of the official spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) that “this (test) is not directed against any country,” considerable publicity was given to the range of the missile - 700 kilometers - with the implicit signal that it was, quite clearly, a Pakistan-specific, nuclear-capable missile.

NUCLEAR SIGNALING, PHASE II: MAY 14, 2002 – JUNE 17, 2002

This month was the most tense of the entire military confrontation, when New Delhi again came close to using force against Pakistan in response to the May 14 terrorist attack in Kaluchak. During this period, the war rhetoric from India was at an all-time high, with New Delhi continuing to threaten the use of force, whilst deliberately ignoring Pakistan’s nuclear signaling. An added dimension to India’s policy appeared to be a public appeal to the international community to reign in Pakistan’s support of terrorism.

Just after the Kaluchak attack, Vajpayee informed President George W. Bush in a telephone call that, “India will take appropriate action.”¹⁴ Vajpayee also informed parliament that the nation would counter the attack at Kaluchak. Subsequently, both houses of parliament adopted a unanimous resolution condemning the “most dastardly” attack and pledged to end the “senseless acts

¹¹ Josy Joseph, “Army chief goes on the offensive, says situation on border is ‘war-like,’” *Rediff.com*, January 11, 2002, available at <http://inhome.rediff.com/news/2002/jan/11army2.htm>.

¹² “Uncalled for concerns: Fernandes,” *The Hindu*, January 12, 2002, available at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2002/01/12/stories/2002011201040100.htm>.

¹³ The Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on February 21, 1999, by the Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr. K. Raghunath, and the Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Mr. Shamshad Ahmad. The MoU called on both sides “to provide each other with advance notification in respect of ballistic missile flight tests, and ... conclude a bilateral agreement in this regard.”

¹⁴ Press statement of the telephone conversation between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, “President George W. Bush Condemns Terrorist Attack in Kaluchak,” May 15, 2002, available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/event/2002/05/14event02.htm>.

of terrorism.”¹⁵ The Indian COAS, General Padmanabhan, on an official visit to Nepal, was quoted as stating, “the time for action has come,” though he added that this was a political decision.¹⁶

On May 20, Union Home Minister L.K. Advani said the government “would go ahead and win the proxy war like we did in 1971.”¹⁷ However, on May 21 in Jammu, Vajpayee stated that he did not “see any war clouds.”¹⁸ In Kupwara, the following day, addressing Army personnel, he contradicted his earlier statement by emphatically asserting that “the time has come for a decisive battle and we will have a sure victory in this battle.”¹⁹ In Srinagar the next day, questioned on his statement on war clouds, Vajpayee stated, “the sky may be clear, but sometimes even when the sky is clear there is lightning,” but he hoped that lightning would not strike.²⁰ In a formal statement issued on the occasion, Vajpayee was quoted as having stated that India was preparing for a “decisive victory.”²¹ These statements were perceived by Indian security analysts as referring to a possible attack against Pakistan. A “war of words” also appeared to be playing out in the Indian media. Responding to an unsourced Indian media report that Pakistan had deployed the nuclear-capable *Shaheen I* ballistic missiles (with a range of 800 kilometers) on the border, an unnamed Indian official was quoted as stating that India’s missile systems had been in position for some time.²²

These were, arguably, the most important - though confusing and apparently contradictory - Indian pronouncements at the critical juncture of the crisis. It is crucial to note that Vajpayee’s comments on a “decisive battle” on May 22 were made during an address to Army troops in Kupwara. These were officers and jawans who were already beginning to tire of being at the highest level of operational preparedness for over five months, amidst harsh weather conditions. Vajpayee’s speech essentially appeared intended to boost the morale of Indian armed forces personnel, and provide some direction to the increasing confusion over the future course of action vis-à-vis Pakistan. But, at the same time, it appeared intended to impact on Islamabad and especially Washington, indicating limits on India’s patience over Pakistan’s perceived intransigence.

This was reflected a few days later as well. On May 26, a day before Musharraf’s well-publicized second address to the nation, Vajpayee gave a stern

¹⁵ Neerja Chowdhury, “This time, all dressed up and no where to go?,” *The Indian Express*, May 18, 2002.

¹⁶ “The Time for Action, says Army Chief,” *The Tribune*, May 16, 2002.

¹⁷ Atul Aneja and Sandeep Dikshit, “Military Preparations at a brisk pace,” *The Hindu*, May 21, 2002.

¹⁸ “War clouds recede after week of tough rhetoric,” *Indo-Asian News Service*, May 31, 2002, available at <http://www.newsindia-times.com/2002/05/31/special10-top.html>.

¹⁹ Luv Puri, “Be ready for decisive battle, PM tells jawans,” *The Hindu*, May 23, 2002.

²⁰ Luv Puri, “Border situation tense, challenging: PM,” *The Hindu*, May 24, 2002.

²¹ “Vajpayee ready for political solution to J&K issue,” *Rediff.com*, May 23, 2002, available at <http://in.rediff.com/news/2002/may/23jk1.htm>.

²² Rajat Pandit, “India unleashes retaliatory fire,” *The Times of India*, May 24, 2002.

warning to Pakistan, while, at the same time, stressing the critical role the international community could play in reigning in Pakistan and averting a war. From the northern hill station of Manali, where he had ostensibly gone on holiday after his visit to Jammu and Kashmir, Vajpayee reflected that “we should have given a fitting reply” the day “they” attacked parliament.²³ Although this was subsequently clarified, as not stating that “we should have struck, but that it would have been better to...have taken action immediately after December 13,” its import was clear.²⁴ At the same time, Vajpayee added, “world leaders told India to keep patience while condemning the December 13 attack. But, India won’t follow the same advice now. The world should understand there is a limit to India’s patience.”²⁵

Musharraf’s televised address to the nation on May 27 was seen as another opportunity to ease tensions with India, the first having been frittered away in the absence of implementing measures following his January 12 speech. Instead, dressed in military uniform, Musharraf’s speech was perceived as highly provocative in New Delhi. Not surprisingly, the Indian government’s response was harsh and focused. At a press conference the following day, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh began by stressing that the address was both “disappointing and dangerous:” disappointing in the repetition of earlier assurances and dangerous as “tension has been added to, not reduced.”²⁶

Partly in response to the war rhetoric emanating from New Delhi, a senior member of the Pakistani cabinet, Lt. General Javed Ashraf Qazi, told the official Iranian News Agency (IRNA) in Islamabad on May 22 that Pakistan would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if its survival was at stake. As Minister for Railways, and a former Chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (1993-95), Qazi stated, “If it ever comes to the annihilation of Pakistan then what is this damned nuclear option for, we will use (it) against the enemy.” He added, “If Indians will destroy most of us, we too will annihilate parts of the adversary. If Pakistan is being destroyed through conventional means, we will destroy them by using the nuclear option as they say if I am going down the ditch, I will also take my enemy with me.”²⁷

A week later, Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, Munir Akram, asserted his country’s right to use nuclear weapons against India’s conventional superiority. At a press conference in New York on May 29, his second day in this post, Akram stated, “we have to rely on our own means to deter Indian aggression. We have that means and we will not neutralize

²³ Inder Malhotra, “Of Diplomacy, rhetoric and terror: Ground realities matter most,” *The Tribune*, May 27, 2002, available at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020530/edit.htm#4>.

²⁴ “Transcript of Press Conference of Jaswant Singh,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, May 28, 2002, available at: <http://meaindia.nic.in/mediainteraction/2002/05/28mi01.htm>.

²⁵ Rahul Bedi, “A strike staunched,” *Frontline* 19, no.12 (June 8-21, 2002), available at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1912/19120130.htm>.

²⁶ “Transcript of Press Conference of Jaswant Singh,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, op. cit.

²⁷ “Pakistan may consider nuclear option: Minister,” *Press Trust of India*, May 22, 2002.

it by any doctrine of no first use.” Accusing India of having a “license to kill” with conventional weapons, he queried, “How can Pakistan, a weaker power, be expected to rule out all means of deterrence?”²⁸

None of these Pakistani statements were ever denied, or alleged to have been misquoted by the media. Additional pronouncements followed to alleviate their negative impact on international public opinion. In an interview with the *Washington Post* published on May 26, Musharraf attempted to downplay the threat of nuclear war. On being asked to describe the circumstances in which he would consider using nuclear weapons if war were to erupt, he said,

“This is a – it is such a question which I wouldn’t like to even imagine, frankly, that we come to a stage where this is due. But let me give an assessment that this stage will never come...We have forces. They follow a strategy of deterrence. And we are very capable of deterring them...I really don’t think we will ever reach that stage, and I only hope that we – I hope and pray that we will never reach that stage. It’s too unthinkable.”²⁹

Nonetheless, in the midst of this rhetoric, Pakistan flight-tested three types of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. Although Islamabad also unilaterally provided New Delhi (along with the P-5 and other neighboring states) with advanced notification of these tests in accord with the Lahore MoU, their timing could not be missed. On May 25, the North Korean-based *Ghauri (Hatf V)* (1,500 km) medium-range, surface-to-surface ballistic missile was tested, followed by the Chinese-based *Ghaznavi (Hatf III)* short-range (300 km) missile the next day. Two days later, coinciding with the visit of British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to Islamabad, Pakistan launched the *Abdali* short-range (180 km) ballistic missile. Taking place as they did, amidst the presence of some 5,000 American military personnel in Pakistan deployed to support the Global War on Terrorism in Afghanistan, these tests also sent a strong message of resistance to Indian coercive diplomacy and readiness to engage in military action.

Although Pakistan’s nuclear signaling through public statements and missile tests were viewed as extremely provocative by New Delhi, there was no reaction to them in kind for fear of invoking Kashmir as a “nuclear flashpoint.” New Delhi therefore publicly scoffed at Pakistan’s ballistic missile flight tests. Vajpayee, in Manali at the time of the first test, appeared singularly unimpressed, dismissing it as “routine” and saying that India was not taking it

²⁸ Dharam Shourie, “Defiant Pakistan threatens to use nukes,” *Rediff.com*, May 30, 2002, available at <http://in.rediff.com/news/2002/may/30war2.htm>.

²⁹ Steven Coll, “Musharraf says raids in Kashmir have ended: Pakistan President demands India’s Reply,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 2002; and “President’s Interview” (Excerpts), *Washington Post*, May 20, 2002.

seriously.³⁰ At various times, the Indian MEA responded to the missile tests as unimpressive; as there was “nothing indigenous about it,” since the missiles were derived from imported technology or acquired hardware; as Pakistan engaging in “missile antics;” and as targeted primarily at Pakistan’s domestic audience.³¹

During this intense period, India began appealing publicly to the international community to constrain Pakistan’s adventurism in Kashmir, emboldened by the condemnation of the Kaluchak attack by a senior US administration official on a visit to New Delhi at the time. On the day of the Kaluchak attack, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca, at a speech at the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) in New Delhi, noted that, “It is just this type of barbarism that the war on terrorism is determined to stop.”³²

At a May 28 press conference, Minister for External Affairs Jaswant Singh for the first time publicly expressed disappointment that Musharraf and some of his ministers were speaking “very casually about nuclearization.” He stated that “this tantamounts to nuclearization of terrorism,” adding that “...in this we see an example of how promotion of terrorism and the threat of nuclear weapons is being held simultaneously. The international community has to take note of the seriousness of these two dangers.”³³ A few days later, Defense Minister George Fernandes, participating in the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri La dialogue in Singapore, queried why “world opinion is not reacting to such open threats of Pakistan on use of nuclear weapons. Is this not an attempt to blackmail India and the rest of the global community?”³⁴

Vajpayee went even further a few months later, when he stated that “dark threats were held out that actions by India to stamp out cross-border terrorism could provoke a nuclear war.” Addressing the 57th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, he warned that nuclear blackmail had emerged as a “new arrow in the quiver of state-sponsored terrorism.” He went on to say that to succumb to such blatant “nuclear terrorism” would mean “forgetting the bitter lessons of the September 11 tragedy.”³⁵

³⁰ “Roundup: Pakistan Conducts Missile Tests Amid Rising Tensions with India,” *People’s Daily*, May 27, 2002, available at http://english.people.com.cn/200205/27/eng20020527_96486.shtml.

³¹ “Transcript of Press Conference of Jaswant Singh,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, op. cit.; and “Pak. Missile test a provocation,” *The Hindu*, October 5, 2002.

³² Atul Aneja, “Pullout of forces not possible: Delhi,” *The Hindu*, May 15, 2002, available at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2002/05/15/stories/2002051502990100.htm>.

³³ “Transcript of Press Conference of Jaswant Singh,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, op. cit.

³⁴ Address by George Fernandes at the IISS Asia Security Conference, Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2002.

³⁵ Address by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the 57th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 13, 2002.

The only exception to New Delhi's circumspect, and largely restrained, policy on nuclear signaling to Pakistan during this phase – to strenuously avoid any mention of nuclear weapons, as well as deliberately ignore any nuclear signaling from Islamabad – arose, quite unexpectedly, from an interview of the senior-most bureaucrat in the Ministry of Defense (MoD). In early June 2002, Defense Secretary Yogendra Narain told the New Delhi-based weekly newsmagazine *Outlook* that India would retaliate with nuclear weapons if Pakistan used its atomic arsenal. Both countries were therefore required to be prepared for “mutual destruction.”³⁶ However, in a manner similar to the government's reaction to General Padmanabhan's press statements in January 2002, a public denial was soon issued. The press release issued from the MoD stated, “The Government makes it clear that India does not believe in the use of nuclear weapons. Neither does it visualize that it will be used by any other country.”³⁷

NUCLEAR SIGNALING, PHASE III: JUNE 17, 2002 – APRIL 18, 2003

These ten months saw the dramatic easing of Indo-Pakistan tensions through facilitation by the United States and the United Kingdom, the successful conduct of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, and the withdrawal and demobilization of the Indian and Pakistani armed forces from the international border. This phase ended with Vajpayee's famous “hand of friendship” speech in Srinagar.

During this period marked by decreasing tensions, India's policy on nuclear signaling was reversed. Instead of deliberately avoiding and ignoring nuclear signals, as in the recent past, in the “non-crisis” phase New Delhi appeared intent on conveying to Pakistan the credibility of its nuclear forces and its “second strike” nuclear capability to dispel any doubts on this account in Islamabad. Not surprisingly, India's official nuclear doctrine was also publicized in January 2003.

With the dramatic easing of tensions, Vajpayee claimed victory in the crisis in the absence of fighting a war. In an interview to a widely read Hindi language newspaper, *Dainik Jagran*, on June 17, he was quoted as saying that war with Pakistan was averted only due to Islamabad's guarantee that it would crack down on Pakistani-based Islamic militants crossing into Kashmir. This was achieved through international pressure on Pakistan in order to meet India's demand that it end cross-border terrorism. In a clear indication that Pakistan's nuclear deterrence had not worked, he stated, “If Pakistan had not agreed to end infiltration, and America had not conveyed that guarantee to India, then war would not have been averted.”³⁸ The MEA was quick to clarify that Vajpayee's

³⁶ “India will use nuclear weapons if Pakistan does: Defence Official,” *The Hindustan Times*, June 3, 2002.

³⁷ “War, if at all, will be sans nukes: Army,” *The Pioneer*, June 4, 2002.

³⁸ “Pak. Pledge on ultras averted war,” *The Hindu*, June 18, 2002.

remarks should not be construed to indicate that India was ready to start a nuclear conflict with Pakistan.³⁹

Vajpayee's remarks were immediately challenged by an indignant Musharraf the following day when he asserted that deterrence had, in fact, worked. At a dinner for Pakistani nuclear scientists and engineers, Musharraf stated that Pakistan's nuclear weapons had brought a "strategic balance" to South Asia. He said that "heightened international concerns of a nuclear conflict in South Asia, and the hesitation, frustration, and inability of India to attack Pakistan, or conduct a so-called limited war, bear ample testimony to the fact that strategic balance exists in South Asia and that Pakistan's conventional and nuclear capability together deter aggression."⁴⁰ India was quick to denounce this statement. While accusing Islamabad of trying to justify its "nuclear blackmail," it urged the international community not to ignore the "continued manifestations of Pakistani irresponsibility, loose talk, and undiluted hostility towards India," along with the "continued concoction of doomsday theories to justify its use of nuclear blackmail."⁴¹

In support of his contention, Musharraf indicated that he had been prepared to use "unconventional weapons" in the event of an Indian attack. Addressing veterans of the Pakistan Air Force in Karachi on December 30, he stated that "we have defeated our enemy without going into war."⁴² He stated that the Indian Prime Minister had been informed by visiting world leaders "that if the Indian Army moved just a single step beyond the international border or the LoC then *Inshallah* ("By the Will of God") the Pakistan Army and the supporters of Pakistan would surround the Indian Army and that it would not be a conventional war."⁴³

Although Musharraf did not specifically mention "nuclear weapons" in his speech, it was apparent he was referring to little else. Significantly, he also made it clear that Pakistan's "low" nuclear threshold ought to be lowered further, to "a single step" across the LoC by the Indian armed forces. This was quite different from his earlier statement on April 6, 2002 referring to nuclear weapons as those of "last resort." The Indian government promptly responded by noting these "highly dangerous and provocative" remarks.⁴⁴ Subsequently, there was an official Pakistani attempt to "clarify" Musharraf's comment through obfuscation. What Musharraf actually indicated, it was "clarified," was the use of "only unconventional forces and not nuclear or biological weapons."⁴⁵

³⁹ "Transcript of Press Briefing by the Official Spokesperson," *Ministry of External Affairs*, June 17, 2002, available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/>.

⁴⁰ "N-Deterrent averted war: Musharraf," *Agence France-Presse*, June 19, 2002.

⁴¹ "Irresponsible Talk," *The Hindu*, June 19, 2002.

⁴² "Warning forced India to pull back troops, says President," *Dawn*, December 31, 2002.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Gen shoots mouth off, backfires," *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2002.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

These statements prompted Defense Minister George Fernandes into sending a spate of nuclear signals to Pakistan. Fernandes began by describing Musharraf's December 30 statement as "irresponsible."⁴⁶ A week later, he told a CII gathering in Hyderabad that "we can take a bomb or two or more...but when we respond there will be no Pakistan."⁴⁷ To a question of the danger posed to India if Pakistani nuclear weapons fell into the hands of hard-line Islamic terrorists, he elaborated, in a BBC phone-in radio program in Hindi on the occasion of India's Republic day on January 26, 2003, "We have been saying all through that the person who heads Pakistan today has been talking about using dangerous weapons including the nukes. Well, I would reply by saying that if Pakistan has decided that it wants to get itself destroyed and erased from the world map, then it may take this step of madness, but if (it) wants to survive then it would not do so."

In order to emphasize its nuclear forces, and the credibility of its "second strike" nuclear capability, India provided a glimpse of its much-delayed nuclear doctrine and nuclear command and control arrangements. On January 4, 2003, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) issued a statement announcing the formalization of India's nuclear doctrine and command and control structures. The statement declared that nuclear retaliation to a first strike would be massive, and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.⁴⁸ The statement also noted that the CCS was satisfied with existing command and control structures, the state of readiness, the targeting strategy for a retaliatory attack, and operating procedures for various stages of alert and launch. It also reviewed and approved the arrangements for alternate chains of command for retaliatory nuclear strikes in all eventualities. Finally, the CCS statement publicized the appointment of a Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Forces Command, to manage and administer all Strategic Forces. Nuclear weapons would not only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory, but also "on Indian forces anywhere," which remained undefined. India would "retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons" in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by "biological or chemical weapons."⁴⁹ In tandem with this assertive nuclear posture, there were publicized reports that the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), a group of non-officials formally established to advise the National Security Council (NSC), had suggested a review of India's no first use pledge a few days prior to the publication of the broad concepts of India's nuclear doctrine.⁵⁰ A week later, on January 10, 2003, India carried out another test of its nuclear-capable *Agni* ballistic missile.

⁴⁶ "Pakistan will be wiped out in nuclear counterattack: Fernandes," *Agence France-Presse*, January 27, 2003.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Press Release, "The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Operationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine," *Ministry of External Affairs*, January 4, 2003, available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/pressrelease/2003/01/04pr01.htm>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Subash Kapila, "India's Strategic Postures Reviewed," Paper no. 604 (South Asia Analysis Group, February 2003), available at <http://www.saag.org/papers7/paper604.html>.

The release of a summary of India's nuclear doctrine was preceded by several public pronouncements on the possibility of using preemptive force against terrorist training camps in Pakistan. New Delhi drew from and was encouraged by the publication of the US National Security Strategy in September 2002, which asserted the US right "of self-defense by acting preemptively," and the growing signs of war against Iraq in late 2002. This appeared to "legitimize" India's assertions of using force across the LoC against terrorist training camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. In this regard, Jaswant Singh, now serving as Finance Minister, stated that every country had a right to preemptive strikes as an inherent part of its right to self-defense, and preemption was not the prerogative of any one nation. Speaking at the end of September 2002 in Washington DC, he said, "Preemption or prevention is inherent in deterrence. Where there is deterrence there is preemption. The same thing is there in Article 51 of the UN Charter which calls it 'the right of self-defense.'"⁵¹ Not surprisingly, this was quickly refuted by the United States, which questioned India's rationale for preemptive strikes. US Secretary of State Colin Powell pronounced that no parallels could be drawn between the situation in Iraq and the Indo-Pakistan face off on Kashmir.⁵²

Amidst the war on Iraq, the principle of preemption was once again picked up by Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Singh. On April 2, 2003, in an *Agence France-Presse* interview, Sinha rhetorically asserted India's right to take "preemptive" military action against Pakistan along the lines of the coalition war against Iraq. He stated, "we derive some satisfaction...because I think all those people in the international community...realize that India has a much better case to go for preemptive action against Pakistan than the US has in Iraq."⁵³ George Fernandes then played down this statement, saying that these were "casual" comments and not government policy.⁵⁴

Less than a fortnight later, Vajpayee made his widely applauded "hand of friendship" speech in Jammu and Kashmir. Addressing a public rally, Vajpayee said problems could not be resolved through the barrel of the gun but only through dialogue. Emphasizing that the time had come for ushering in a sea change in Indo-Pakistan relations, he stated, "We are extending our hand of friendship but it should be reciprocated."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Sridhar Krishnaswami, "Every country has the right to pre-emption: Jaswant," *The Hindu*, October 1, 2002.

⁵² J.N. Dixit, "Linkage Politics," *Indian Express*, April 18, 2003.

⁵³ "Interview of External Affairs Minister Shri. Yashwant Sinha with AFP," *Agence France-Presse*, April 2, 2003, available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/interview/2003/04/02i01.htm>.

⁵⁴ Jawed Naqvi, "India blames Pakistan for Agra Summit failure: Talks ruled out," *Dawn*, April 15, 2003.

⁵⁵ "Talks, not guns, will solve issues: Vajpayee," *Press Trust of India*, April 18, 2003.

CONCLUSION

Amidst the 2001-02 border confrontation, New Delhi attempted to convey different and distinctive signals. During the first phase of the crisis period (December 13, 2001-May 14, 2002), India emphatically threatened the use of conventional force against Pakistan. In the second phase (May 14, 2002 – June 17, 2002), an added Indian dimension was the appeal to the international community to reign in Pakistan's support for terrorism. During both these phases, India's unstated but deliberate and circumspect policy was to avoid any nuclear signaling, while, at the same time, deliberately ignoring any nuclear signaling from Islamabad. This was essentially motivated by an over-riding political consideration - to downplay the perception of Kashmir as a "nuclear flashpoint," thereby lending credence to Pakistan's position. Indeed, India's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York was to describe these events as an "artificial nuclear scare."⁵⁶

In the denouement to the crisis (June 17, 2002 – April 18, 2003), this policy undertook a dramatic reversal. New Delhi emphatically threatened the use of Indian nuclear weapons, and the total destruction of Pakistan, in the event that Pakistan's nuclear weapons were used first against India. This was the rejoinder to counter Pakistan's nuclear signaling during the first two phases of the crisis when Pakistan conveyed its intent to use nuclear weapons to prevent an Indian conventional attack. New Delhi's signaling during the third phase appeared to be an attempt to convince a domestic audience and Pakistan of the credibility of India's nuclear deterrent.

India and Pakistan's signals were not clear and easily discernible. Indeed, the signals from both New Delhi and Islamabad appeared confusing and ambiguous. Five major lessons emerge from this narrative on Indo-Pakistani nuclear signaling.

First, a signal is not always read as intended. Whereas one side may actually be signaling intent, the other may simply miss it, with worrying implications for stability. Signaling depends, in the first instance, on confirmation of the moves that provide the basis for the signal. But confirmation or rebuttal of the signal requires indications and warning signs that are monitored and conveyed back to the leadership. If these are missed, the signaler may perceive the other's absence of action as negating the signal. This could force the signaler to raise the stakes, thereby further exacerbating tensions. A case in point was Pakistan's alleged movement of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles for deployment during the Kargil conflict in July 1999, which New Delhi may not have been aware of, if indeed this occurred.

⁵⁶ Statement of V.K. Nambiar, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Press Release on "Focus of Conflict Resolution as the General Assembly continues debate on work of organization and follow up to the Millennium Summit," 57th General Assembly Plenary, 24th and 25th Meetings, October 7, 2002, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/ga10074.doc.htm>.

Second, a non-signal may also be perceived as a signal. Specific actions may have technological or bureaucratic dynamics independent of on-going political tensions, which could be perceived as signaling. In a charged political environment such assessments would not be unusual. It is not always the case that specific actions are always well thought out and extensively deliberated within governments.

Third, signaling is confused by a large number of actors. Although New Delhi perceived signals to its multiple constituencies as fairly clear and unambiguous, they were not perceived as such due to the number of principal actors involved. Clearly, the principal signaler was Prime Minister Vajpayee. In addition, Defense Minister George Fernandes and the External Affairs Ministers – Jaswant Singh, followed by Yashwant Sinha – were involved in signaling at various stages. Interestingly enough, Union Home Minister L.K. Advani was rarely involved in issuing these signals, although he is perceived as hawkish on these matters. At critical times, there were two other major players involved in nuclear signaling – Army Chief General Padmanabhan and Defense Secretary Yogendra Narain. This relatively large number of senior individuals involved in signaling tended to confuse New Delhi's signals, as perceived by Islamabad and Washington.

Fourth, signals can be at cross-purposes with one another. At crucial times, New Delhi's signals were contradictory. When the Indian government appeared keen to play down nuclear signals during the first two phases of the crisis, the statements by the Army Chief and Defense Secretary, and the test of the Pakistan-specific nuclear-capable *Agni* ballistic missile suggested otherwise. The subsequent clarifications that ensued from George Fernandes and the MoD muddied the waters even further. It was not clear, for example, whether the actual signal was the Army Chief's or the Defense Minister's, as they contradicted each other. In a similar manner, it was not clear whether emphasis ought to be placed on the Defense Secretary's signals or the subsequent rebuttal by the MoD. Finally, it must be noted that Pakistan's signals were also contradictory.

Fifth, the understanding of signals by both sides may be weak, particularly when they are contradictory or keyed to different audiences. In both New Delhi and Islamabad, it was exceedingly difficult to interpret the other's signals and to know who was an authorized signaler and who was talking extemporaneously. When signals were contradictory, was this because of different audiences or not?

There appears to have been considerable confusion and ambiguity in New Delhi and Islamabad in sending, as well as receiving, critical signals during the 2001-02 border confrontation. If misperceptions and miscalculations on nuclear issues are to be avoided in a future military crisis, both states need to attempt to develop a clear set of principles for signaling to each other, and others, amidst a

disruption of diplomatic communication. Potential adversaries need to attempt to make signaling clear and unambiguous, and to not convey unintended signals. It would therefore be wise if potential adversaries deliberately limit the number of actors initiating signaling. The misreading of signals can also be reduced if potential adversaries attempt to understand better each other's principal signalers and the internal dynamics operating within respective political systems. Finally, it would be wise to establish a "back channel" of communication to help clarify signals during a crisis period. This would need to be authorized at the highest political level. The interlocutor would need to have the trust of their leaders, and they must be insulated from existing political tensions. It would be best to initiate "back channel" diplomacy amidst a thaw in bilateral relations and not to wait for another crisis to erupt.