

Limited War, Escalation Control, and the Nuclear Option in South Asia

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The title of this essay consciously borrows from the eminent western deterrence strategist, Bernard Brodie, whose book, *Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option*, is surely his least successful work.¹ The fault lies less with the author than with the subject matter, which has proven to be remarkably resistant to sensible analysis, despite the attempts of top-shelf western strategists, including Henry Kissinger, Thomas Schelling, and Herman Kahn, to tackle the subject matter.²

Deterrence is an abstract notion that sometimes fails real world tests. Previous failures of deterrence, including the 1999 Pakistani incursion across the Kashmir divide, have not led to nuclear detonations, but this outcome cannot be assumed forever. As Robert Jervis has written,

Although undesired escalation obviously does not occur all the time, the danger is always present. The room for misunderstanding, the pressure to act before the other side has seized the initiative, the role of unexpected defeats or unanticipated opportunities, all are sufficiently great – and interacting – so that it is rare that decision-makers can confidently predict the end point of the trajectory which an initial resort to violence starts.³

Nonetheless, the best and the brightest western strategic theorists tried to envision how escalation could be satisfactorily controlled in a competition between nuclear-armed rivals, especially if the nuclear threshold were crossed.

* The author wishes to thank Devin T. Hagerty, Ellen Laipson, George Perkovich, and Scott Sagan for their helpful comments, and Vishal Agraharkar and Ziad Haider for their research assistance.

¹ Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

² Kissinger's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960) and *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), and Kahn's *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965) are classics of this genre.

³ Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 140.

Typical of this genre was Glenn Snyder's suggestion that,

While not incurring a serious risk of an immediate all-out response, and while causing some physical attrition of the enemy's power to move on the ground, tactical reprisals would still serve the bargaining function by demonstrating a willingness to "up the ante" and to continue doing so until the other side agreed to settle the war... Reprisals against forces, especially tactical forces, allow us to demonstrate this possible intent at minimum provocation and at minimum initial damage to our own economy and population.⁴

This kind of strategic analysis did not provide political leaders much comfort as to how escalation might be controlled up to and across the nuclear threshold. Will strategists and military planners in South Asia have more success in developing a plausible theory of, and military plans for, escalation control?

Escalation control presumed mutual agreement between nuclear rivals to fight for limited stakes. As Brodie explained, "[T]he curtailing of our taste for unequivocal victory is one of the prices we pay to keep the physical violence, and thus the costs and penalties, from going beyond the level of the tolerable."⁵ Robert Osgood defined limited war as "part of a general 'strategy of conflict' in which adversaries would bargain with each other through the medium of graduated military responses, within the boundaries of contrived mutual restraints, in order to achieve a negotiated settlement short of mutual destruction."⁶ This assumed, of course, that both nuclear-armed adversaries were willing to play by the same general rules – a condition, as Osgood subsequently acknowledged, that did not apply during the Cold War. "One trouble with all strategies of local war in Europe," he wrote in 1979, "is that the Soviet Union has shown virtually no inclination to be a partner to them."⁷ While US strategists were constructing rungs along the escalation ladder, the Soviet General Staff was planning for a *blitzkrieg* across Europe.

Another reason why US strategic thinkers failed to devise a plausible theory of escalation control during the Cold War was the inherent difficulties in communicating with an adversary whose differences of view and objectives were so great that they would result in conflict. If miscommunication with, or misreading of, an adversary lead to conflict, this would suggest that communication to keep that war limited might also fail – assuming that lines of communication remain intact. But, as Barry Posen has noted, "Inadvertent escalation may also result from the great difficulty of gathering and interpreting

⁴ Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 210-212.

⁵ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 314.

⁶ Robert Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1979), p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

the most relevant information about a war in progress and using it to understand, control, and orchestrate the war.”⁸

Another major deterrence theorist, Thomas Schelling, postulated hopefully that a process of “tacit bargaining” during limited war might point to a settlement because of the “intrinsic magnetism of particular outcomes, especially those that enjoy prominence, uniqueness, simplicity, precedent, or some rationale that makes them qualitatively differentiable from the continuum of possible alternatives.”⁹ However, as Schelling himself acknowledged, since communication has presumably been limited prior to the conflict and would be quite strained during a limited war, there could be no assurance that tacit bargaining “will succeed in any particular case or that, when it succeeds, it will yield to either party a particularly favorable outcome.”¹⁰

Western deterrence theory regarding limited war was deeply suspect because it presumed rational choices and effective command and control amidst the fog of war – especially the chaos of a radiated battlefield. Posen challenged these heroic assumptions, concluding that, “[T]he fog of war increases the likelihood of inadvertent escalation because misperceptions, misunderstandings, poor communications, and unauthorized or unrestrained offensive operations could reduce the ability of civilian authorities to influence the course of the war.”¹¹ Another outstanding thinker on this subject, Morton Halperin, wrote that graduated escalation could “continue until both sides decide that it is not in their interest to expand the war.” However, Halperin himself acknowledged that, while

...both sides may desire to avoid the economic cost of employing greater military power, there is no reason to believe that only the losing side might expand the war. The winning side might alter its war-termination conditions in ways which require an expansion of the war...The necessary condition for the stabilization of local war is agreement with the decision system of each side – and not agreement between the two sides – that further expansion is undesirable.¹²

This keen insight further erodes the foundations of limited war theory, since it requires adversaries not only to draw proper conclusions from each other’s moves on the battlefield, but also to understand the dynamics of bureaucratic politics in enemy territory, and correctly predict the outcome of internal debates. To make matters even worse, Schelling and Halperin acknowledged that, “Accidental occurrences of various kinds are also more likely during a limited

⁸ Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 19.

⁹ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹ Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, op. cit., p. 22.

¹² Morton Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1963), pp. 32 and 35.

war.”¹³ Unfortunately, accidents only lend themselves to rational analysis well after the fact.

Yet another reason why US deterrence theorists and military strategists failed to produce a plausible theory of limited war was because they usually were far more interested in escalation dominance. In their view, fielding dominant war-fighting capabilities was the preferred way to deter and dissuade an adversary from doing unfortunate things. And if deterrence and dissuasion failed, dominant war-fighting capabilities could be useful to influence outcomes in limited war. After all, how could one hope to convince an adversary to forgo escalation if not from a position of dominance?

Possessing dominant nuclear war-fighting capabilities would also come in handy for an all-out war, where some semblance of victory required destroying as many opposing nuclear forces as possible before they destroyed you. In the anodyne terminology of deterrence theory and war planning, this targeting objective was known as “damage limitation.” Greater “flexibility” with respect to nuclear targeting was but one of the instruments associated with this dogged pursuit.

Fortunately, these calculations of nuclear weapon strategists were not tested. Instead, the arms race became a surrogate for actual warfare during the Cold War. As a result, the jockeying for advantage – and the impulse to avoid disadvantage – was ceaseless. Targeting for victory – or at least relative advantage at war’s end – required destroying the adversary’s command and control nodes before yours were severely damaged. But striking these priority targets also meant damaging prospects for escalation control. As offensive nuclear capabilities grew, and as strategic defenses continued to face confounding technical challenges, western theories of escalation control appeared increasingly divorced from reality.

Since neither superpower was willing to accept the other’s quest for nuclear advantage and both sought to somehow escape from the straitjacket of mutual deterrence, stockpiles and deployed forces reached dizzying heights.¹⁴ As opposing nuclear capabilities grew, the disconnect between plans for escalation dominance and hopes for escalation control widened. So, too, did the distance between nuclear war planners and political leaders who bore the burdens of deciding when to press the nuclear button. The deeper western deterrence theorists delved into the subject matter, the more they clarified dilemmas rather than solutions. Limited war theory needed to be kept at arm’s length by political leaders in the United States and Soviet Union, who understood intuitively that nuclear detonations didn’t solve anything.

¹³ Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1964), p. 30.

¹⁴ I have borrowed the notion of “escape” from conversations with George Perkovich.

EXTRAPOLATING COLD WAR EXPERIENCE TO SOUTH ASIA

There are obvious differences and qualifiers that need to be stated when seeking to extrapolate Cold War experience to the nuclear rivalry in South Asia. The two superpowers clearly possessed much larger nuclear arsenals, a condition that India and Pakistan have no desire to emulate. Both superpowers spent heavily on communication, command and control, and intelligence capabilities in the hope that leaders would be able to make deliberate decisions, and to increase prospects that orders would faithfully be executed. Not surprisingly, Islamabad and New Delhi lag far behind Washington and Moscow in these areas. Both superpowers never shed their public concerns about a surprise attack, even as their nuclear arsenals grew to stupefying levels. In contrast, Indian and Pakistani leaders profess not to be concerned about preemptive attack, and are proceeding in a deliberate fashion to develop safeguards against vulnerability.

There were endless arguments during the Cold War about which side held what advantages in the competition, both with respect to nuclear and conventional forces. In South Asia, India enjoys expanding conventional military advantages across the board.¹⁵ The nuclear balance on the subcontinent is opaque at this formative stage. Another obvious difference is that Cold War adversaries were not neighbors. Nor were Cold War disputes related to territorial claims, historical grievances, or religious convictions.

Do these stark differences alleviate or accentuate concerns over escalation control in the case of South Asia? The answer is far from obvious. For starters, it is not at all clear that escalation control is made any easier with large or small nuclear forces. A good case can be made either way. At the early stages of a nuclear competition, modestly sized arsenals tend to be more vulnerable to attack than large forces, but adversaries might not have sufficient intelligence and surveillance capabilities to execute successfully a preemptive attack. On the other hand, large, advanced nuclear arsenals have far more capability to permit the prompt and accurate targeting of opposing nuclear forces, but advanced nuclear powers are also more likely to have forces that are hard to target. In extremis, national leaders could face pressures to escalate either because they think they have too few nuclear options, or because they have a great many. Either way, the deliberate crossing of the nuclear threshold would be a momentarily difficult decision.

Weak or robust command and control arrangements could also lead to divergent outcomes. Rudimentary command and control arrangements could inadvertently lead to an early crossing of the nuclear threshold, and could make it very difficult to control escalation once that threshold has been crossed. Or

¹⁵ See Rodney W. Jones' companion essay, "Nuclear Stability and Escalation Control in South Asia: Structural Factors," in this book.

they could impel national leaders to maintain tight political control over nuclear capabilities. Conversely, robust arrangements could help prevent nuclear detonations, or they could provide false hope that escalation is controllable. None of this is knowable; confident assertions one way or the other are entirely based on conjecture.

Is geographical distance as much of a differential in the Cold War and South Asia cases as is usually postulated? Distance should help in escalation control, and it was surely a good thing that the superpowers did not share a common boundary. But the forces of both superpowers were positioned in close proximity along a divided Germany. Tactical nuclear weapons were deployed here in profusion. Out-manned US military forces relied on plans to use these weapons to blunt a Soviet offensive, and the Kremlin had plans to use these weapons to quicken its advance and to demoralize Western Europe.¹⁶

Cold War strategists sought to differentiate the potential use of these battlefield or tactical nuclear weapons from ocean-spanning, strategic nuclear capabilities. For a short time, Brodie joined this chorus, arguing that the imperatives of avoiding major wars and disastrous retreats lent value to tactical nuclear weapons in limited war scenarios.¹⁷ But Brodie had second thoughts and retracted his argument, concluding that tactical nuclear weapons solved nothing and invited the escalation he sought to avoid.

Here again, the differences between the Cold War and South Asia cases are quite evident, but perhaps less meaningful than we imagine. Despite these stark differences, parallels can still be drawn between a divided Berlin (before Washington and Moscow accepted a territorial *status quo*) and a divided Kashmir. In both cases, one can find a concentration of forces, highly valued real estate, and potential *causus belli*. In the case of South Asia, however, we must add the destabilizing factor of *jihad*, and subtract the presence of forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons during peacetime.

National leaders in both Pakistan and India claim to have no desire to engage in nuclear war-fighting postures, and the day-to-day status of their nuclear capabilities is remarkably relaxed by Cold War standards. Leaders in both nations assert that warheads are not mated with launchers, that nuclear forces are not deployed, even during crises, and that they have no intention of indulging in dangerous nuclear war-fighting practices, or seeking the capabilities to pursue them.

¹⁶ See *Warsaw Pact Military Planning in Central Europe: Revelations From the East German Archives*, [documents seized by Federal Republic of Germany from East German National People's Army following reunification], Translated and Annotated by Mark Kramer, Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project, available at http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=library.document&topic_id=1409&id=6.

¹⁷ Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*, op. cit., p. 75.

Escalation control does not become simpler when nuclear rivals acquire and deploy more diverse nuclear war-fighting capabilities – especially when they maintain portions of these forces on “hair-trigger” alert. While prospects for escalation control are improved by refraining from these Cold War-era practices, they are far from assured. In South Asia, the nuclear rivalry is still at a relatively early stage, where the balance of forces is opaque and new technologies are being fielded. Crises have been occurring with some frequency, during which readiness rates for nuclear-capable forces have apparently been increased. Signaling during crises has been confusing, and intelligence assessments have been found wanting.¹⁸

Under these circumstances, how can escalation control be assured, particularly when one adds to this mix the possibility of a nuclear accident or a catalytic incident by an extremist group during a crisis? If under these tense circumstances, a nuclear “event” were to occur, escalation control would be challenging, to say the least. Much would depend upon the nature of the event, as best this can be determined. Where did the event actually occur? What kind of radioactive material was released and by which means? Was it an accident, an act of nuclear terrorism, sabotage, or an act of war? Did the event produce a mushroom cloud?

Much would also depend on the prior political context and the location in which the event occurred. Were bilateral relations improving or deteriorating before the crisis? Were the armed forces of both countries present at the site of the event? Were there clashes? Were *jihadi* or counter-insurgency operations underway at the site of the event?¹⁹ Obtaining solid information and correct answers to these questions might take time, and national leaders may not have much time to deliberate. If the nuclear event produced a mushroom cloud, decision-making would be severely compressed. Escalation control under these circumstances would be no easier than in a case where nuclear rivals possess very large arsenals.

ESCALATION CONTROL BY MEANS OF A “DEMONSTRATION SHOT”

In western deterrence literature, one means of escalation control is the option of a “demonstration shot.” In this scenario, a singular nuclear detonation would signal an adversary to stop its conventional military advance. Morton Halperin characterized this scenario as follows:

[O]ne side might use tactical nuclear weapons as a device to increase substantially the shared risk that the war would become central either

¹⁸ See the companion essays in this book by Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Feroz Hassan Khan.

¹⁹ A summary of the Henry L. Stimson Center’s Track II programming on scenarios of this kind can be found in Michael Krepon and Ziad Haider, eds., *Reducing Nuclear Dangers in South Asia*, Report No. 50 (Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, January 2004).

by expansion or explosion. The country would be using tactical nuclear weapons not because of their likely influence on the battlefield but as a symbolic act, and would therefore be concerned to use them to demonstrate its own seriousness – to demonstrate the danger that the war might get out of hand – rather than to affect the outcome of the battlefield war. In this case the response of the enemy might well be on the same level, either a backing down on the basis of this demonstration of seriousness, or a corresponding use of tactical nuclear weapons in an effort to force the enemy to desist.²⁰

In this scenario, the chastened adversaries halt matters before more mushroom clouds appear, perhaps with a significant assist from the international community. This scenario presumes that the first mushroom cloud since Nagasaki appears as a result of a considered leadership decision, and not due to a break down of command and control, an accident, or the pre-delegated use of a weapon by a beleaguered local commander. This scenario further presumes that neither adversary would seek to achieve an advantageous outcome in the event of a nuclear exchange; and that command and control arrangements would suffice to prevent unauthorized use after the first detonation. To lend credence to this scenario, the demonstration shot might occur in a remote area, without significant weapon effects. In a South Asian context, a demonstration shot might even occur on the territory of the beleaguered state.

Deterrence strategists during the Cold War needed to place a great deal of credence in rational decision making and the absence of unexpected events on the atomic battlefield; otherwise, the bottom would fall out of their analysis. Even under the most charitable assumptions, however, it was hard during the Cold War to place much credence in escalation control after a demonstration shot. Both adversaries had a surplus of weapons and targeting options, and opposing forces were so spring-loaded for attack that the deck was stacked against a singular nuclear detonation.

If a national leader chose this option, or if it occurred because of a break down in command and control during an intense crisis, the likelihood of many more detonations was great. It was hard to envision that the political imperative of reciprocity, which shadowed most aspects of US-Soviet relations throughout the Cold War, would somehow not apply to a singular nuclear detonation. It was harder, still, to imagine that US and Soviet national security managers would seek to play for a tie in the event of a crossing of the nuclear threshold. Soviet nuclear doctrine envisioned massive, not singular strikes. “Limited” nuclear options came decades late to US nuclear war plans, and many of these options were “limited” only in comparison to the massive options that US nuclear forces were primed to deliver. The dictates of escalation dominance mandated raising

²⁰ Morton Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1963), p. 58.

the stakes, while the imperatives of damage limitation called for skipping rungs on the escalation ladder.

In South Asia, the odds are similarly stacked against a demonstration shot remaining a singular event. Prospects for uncontrolled escalation are high early in a nuclear rivalry, when the size and status of opposing forces are unclear, and when critical vulnerabilities are presumed. When nations have relatively few nuclear options, escalation rungs could be irrelevant. In addition, a demonstration shot could be viewed – both by the initiator and the receiver – as a confirmation of weakness. It would also transfer the initiative and the extent of the response entirely in the hands of the stronger party. These gambits are alien to the thinking of Pakistan’s military establishment.²¹

Given the proximity of the nuclear rivals in South Asia, the western distinction between “tactical” and “strategic” nuclear weapons loses meaning. Distances and flight times are so compressed that any use of a nuclear weapon, regardless of its range and origin of basing, is likely to have strategic consequences. Given these factors, a crossing of the nuclear threshold will likely matter far more than attempts to divine meaning from the particular target struck.

Moreover, responsible authorities in both Pakistan and India stress that they have little expectation of escalation control. Indeed, strategic doctrine and the perceived requirements of deterrence have led officials in both countries to stress their commitment to overwhelming punishment in the event that a “red line” is crossed. This analysis suggests that, despite the very substantial differences between the Cold War and the South Asian nuclear rivalries, the dilemmas of escalation control are quite profound in both cases.

PREEMPTION, VULNERABILITY, AND ESCALATION CONTROL

Concerns over preemption were a recurring theme during the Cold War, reflecting the ability of both superpowers to deliver massive attacks against opposing nuclear forces, notwithstanding the huge size of residual nuclear arsenals. In contrast, India and Pakistan possess modest nuclear capabilities. As noted above, leaders in both countries assert that they have refrained from deploying nuclear forces, even in crisis, and that they keep their warheads separate from their means of delivery. In sharp contrast, Washington and Moscow continue to maintain a large number of nuclear weapons ready for launch.

Which of these strategic force postures – large, advanced nuclear capabilities that are spring-loaded for offensive action, or modest capabilities that are maintained in an extremely relaxed state – presents a more comforting

²¹ I am grateful to Feroz Hassan Khan for these insights.

picture for escalation control? Proponents of arms control rightly argue that having nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert is dangerous, especially in a crisis. But having modest nuclear forces and rudimentary command and control arrangements that are vulnerable to preemption and decapitation in a crisis is also dangerous. “De-mating” warheads from launchers is a good thing – as long as one’s deterrent and national command authority are not subject to preemption and decapitation.

Nuclear stabilization measures on the subcontinent are hampered, in part, by the absence of clearly understood definitions of key terms. For example, three quasi-official interpreters of Pakistan’s nuclear posture acknowledged this dilemma in the following way:

Early warning capability may be more problematic. Even if Pakistan could afford satellite monitoring, the warning will be no more than a few minutes. Non-weaponization and non-deployment would constitute crucial confidence-building measures. However, India’s nuclear doctrine rules this out as it envisages induction and employment. The highest degree of alert will be all the more necessary.²²

The authors’ stated concern over “induction” is odd, since Indian leaders have clearly not equated induction with deployment. Their definition of “employment” is unclear. It could mean the deployment of a nuclear weapon system in a crisis, or the actual use of such a weapon. The reference to heightened alert levels is noteworthy, since it runs counter to the stated Pakistani position that all its nuclear forces are maintained in a low state of readiness.

Even in the absence of mutually understood terms, one may reasonably infer from this quasi-authoritative statement that Pakistan’s security dictates an increase in alert rates – although not necessarily the mating of warheads with launchers – in the event of a severe crisis.²³ Vulnerability mandates preparedness, and nuclear preparedness compounds risk in a crisis environment. “First strike” is not in the lexicon of Indian and Pakistani authorities, but the possibility cannot be dismissed, as long as some doubt exists about the survival of retaliatory capabilities or some hope that a preemptive strike might succeed. As an independent Pakistani analyst has concluded,

[D]eterrence is based not on the credibility of the second strike capability of either side, but on the effectiveness of the first strike. Hence, it would be a nuclear fallacy to believe first that currently both

²² Agha Shahi, Zulfikar Ali Khan, and Abdul Sattar, “Responding to India’s nuclear doctrine,” *Dawn*, October 5, 1998.

²³ For a discussion of the distinction between defensive measures and offensive preparations, see Feroz Hassan Khan’s companion essay.

South Asian nuclear rivals have credible and survivable nuclear capability, and second, that a war can remain limited...²⁴

At this early stage of their nuclear rivalry, India and Pakistan have demonstrated admirable restraint in avoiding a more intense nuclear competition even though, by western yardsticks, they suffer from complementary and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities. New Delhi's relaxed approach to command and control would appear to leave its national command authority vulnerable to decapitation. This problem can be addressed by spending money on construction projects, communication upgrades, planning, and by the dispersal of national leadership in times of extreme crisis.

Pakistan's primary nuclear vulnerability is more difficult to fix: Its deterrent is located at a limited number of airfields and missile bases, all within quick reach of Indian missiles and combat aircraft. In a crisis, this structural vulnerability can be addressed by increasing alert rates, by maintaining nuclear capabilities at covert, satellite facilities, and by moving missiles outside their bases. All of these steps appear advisable to strengthen deterrence, but also could make escalation control much harder to achieve.

Here again, it is extremely difficult to conclude with certainty which of the two nuclear rivalries presents a better model for escalation control. For very different, but quite compelling reasons, the prospects for escalation control across the nuclear threshold appear weak in both cases. As V.R. Raghavan has concluded, "Escalation is inherent in war both because [of] the desire to win, and the need not to lose."²⁵ This insight is not region-specific. Thankfully, analysis of the subject matter remains abstract and theoretical. Our challenge is not to decide which of these nuclear pairings is worse with respect to uncontrolled escalation; it is to seek actions so that this discussion remains abstract and theoretical.

CONVENTIONAL FORCE BALANCES AND ESCALATION

Is the order of battle in South Asia more or less conducive to uncontrolled escalation than was the case during the Cold War? This question presumes that the next use of a nuclear weapon would result from conventional imbalances, which is an arguable proposition. As discussed above, the next use of a nuclear weapon could come as a result of factors that have little to do with conventional force structure, such as an accident, or an act of terror, or a break down in command.

The overall Cold War conventional balance consisted of an accumulation of imbalances, some favoring Moscow, others favoring Washington. But in the key

²⁴ Maria Sultan, "Deterrence and limited war," *The News*, June 3, 2002.

²⁵ V.R. Raghavan, "Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia," *The Nonproliferation Review* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2001).

regions where war could have erupted, the Soviet Union enjoyed much shorter lines of communication and other advantages on the ground. The Soviet Union, however, did not conceive of a military campaign against the west that did not involve the heavy use of nuclear weapons.

Once again, the contrasts to South Asia are quite evident. India enjoys growing conventional advantages in many key areas, while Pakistan enjoys better lines of communication to prospective battlegrounds. Neither country seeks or anticipates that nuclear arms would be used in conjunction with a conventional offensive.²⁶ Despite these dramatic differences, it remains unclear which of the two cases is more problematic for uncontrolled escalation.

Large conventional forces were maintained by the United States and the Soviet Union, but the superpowers kept their powder dry. Nor, after the crises over Berlin and Cuba, did they challenge each other in locales that were of central strategic importance. The situation in South Asia is different, as India and Pakistan have not yet reached a mutual accommodation over Kashmir, as reflected by periodic exchanges of fire across this divide interspersed with wars and crises.

As military capabilities shift increasingly in India's favor, Pakistan's national security establishment could conclude that unconventional options are warranted to offset this imbalance. In response, India's leaders might be encouraged to conclude that they have the means to conduct a limited war to make Pakistan pay for supporting *jihad*. As discussed below, these outcomes would pose a stern test of the viability of escalation control measures below the nuclear threshold. Alternatively, a widening conventional imbalance, as well as the domestic blowback from supporting *jihad* and the need to address Pakistan's internal problems, could help convince the authorities in Pakistan to stop playing with fire in Kashmir. As three eminent western analysts have concluded, "Challenging the *status quo* is usually more difficult than sustaining it because, in most cases, the *status quo* power has a greater stake in preventing change than the challenger has in bringing it about."²⁷ While this conclusion also applies to the subcontinent, its recognition could result in the strikingly different outcomes noted above.

There are simply too many unknowns for anyone to argue authoritatively about scenarios that, if tested, could result in outcomes unique in the annals of history and warfare. Imagine the crucible of the Cuban missile crisis or a future crisis over Kashmir, and then add a mushroom cloud. Think of the public chaos and anger prompted by a singular nuclear event, and the awful suddenness in which more mushroom clouds could appear. Instead of the thirteen days that Kennedy and Khrushchev had to ponder the fate of the world, imagine the

²⁶ Rodney W. Jones' companion essay in this book provides a detailed assessment of this subject.

²⁷ Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janis Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 2.

pressures to make monumental decisions quickly. The decision-making dilemmas facing national leaders under these circumstances would be the most intense in recorded history – assuming, of course, that decisions are made by national leaders instead of subordinates due to a break down in command and control.

NUCLEAR OPTIONS AND ESCALATION CONTROL DURING THE COLD WAR

Henry Kissinger framed the dilemma of escalation control across the nuclear threshold in a way that remains pertinent today in South Asia:

Given the power of modern weapons, a nation that relies on all-out war as its chief deterrent imposes a fearful psychological handicap on itself. The most agonizing decision a statesman can face is whether or not to unleash all-out war; all pressures will make for hesitation, short of direct attack threatening the national existence. In any other situation he will be inhibited by the incommensurability between the cost of the war and the objective in dispute.²⁸

Kissinger also noted that, “A deterrent which one is afraid to implement when it is challenged ceases to be a deterrent.”²⁹ Adversarial nuclear powers in South Asia, like the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War, remain stuck on the horns of this dilemma.

During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow first attempted to escape from deterrence by promulgating strategies of massive nuclear attack. While this option remained in strategic war plans, it enjoyed a very short run in terms of US declaratory policy. No national leader likes the choice of “all or nothing” when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons. Massive retaliation was quickly eclipsed. Beginning in the late 1950s, limited war options came into vogue in the United States.

The highly imaginative mind of Herman Kahn tried to map a combined exit and victory strategy from this “all or nothing” dilemma. Kahn dove awkwardly into the task of defining the characteristics of an adversary’s behavior. Knowing one’s adversary and having multiple and increasingly coercive nuclear options – rungs in the escalation ladder – were Kahn’s two keys to nuclear victory short of an all-out strategic exchange.³⁰

These efforts were alien to the US national psyche, which found nuclear weapons acceptable as a deterrent, but reprehensible as war-fighting instruments. The likes of Kahn were easily caricatured in Stanley Kubrick’s

²⁸ Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, op. cit., p. 133.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁰ See Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, op. cit.

classic movie, *Dr. Strangelove*.³¹ Behind the caricature were deadly serious questions about the competence of deterrence strategists to evaluate an adversary's national psyche when they appeared to be so far removed from the psyche of their fellow citizens.

Given the widespread, domestic revulsion to conceptions of fighting and winning a nuclear war, these matters became far too sensitive to be discussed or defended in public discourse. They were therefore relegated to the oxygen-deprived rooms of nuclear war planners. The coherence of these plans depended, above all else, on the absence of scrutiny by disbelievers. The public and the nuclear war planners had to inhabit separate universes; otherwise, both the citizenry's peace of mind and the *status quo* of the nuclear establishment would have been severely disturbed.

Throughout the Cold War, the pursuit of flexible nuclear options worked at cross-purposes with the objective of escalation control. Hawks presumed that the acquisition of superior nuclear war-fighting capabilities was necessary in order to leverage favorable outcomes and to convince an adversary that it was preferable to stop rather than to absorb even more nuclear detonations. Because an adversary might be unwilling to stop, nuclear war planners applied themselves to the task of placing all targets that could wreak terrible destruction "at risk." The term for this in deterrence theory is "damage limitation." To succeed at damage limitation, the nation would require the means to carry out a massive preemptive strike as well as missile and civil defenses that could prevent or reduce the consequences of retaliatory blows.

As superpower nuclear arsenals grew more sophisticated, targeting options proliferated. Flexible nuclear options, however, did not provide much confidence that escalation could be controlled. As Jervis noted during a particularly virulent phase of the nuclear competition, "Flexibility has become an end in itself and a substitute for the unattainable end of a strategy for terminating the war."³²

Needless to say, targeting strategies to escape from deterrence and to achieve "favorable" outcomes were not fit topics of public conversation. Hardliners in the United States circumvented this problem by ascribing nuclear war-winning motives to the Kremlin, which had lost millions of its citizens during World War II and was ruthless enough to suffer more such losses in a nuclear war. In this view, there was, alas, no alternative but to confront hard truths and to make appropriate preparations – couched publicly in the dictates of deterrence. Hardliners in the Soviet Union no doubt ascribed similar motives to US hawks. Military planners in both superpowers inferred intentions from capabilities – and the capabilities to mount prompt attacks against nuclear

³¹ The subtitle of the movie, which was released in 1964, was "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb."

³² Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, op. cit., p. 80.

targets grew steeply in the last two decades of the Cold War. US and Soviet nuclear strategists used the language of deterrence, while seeking war-winning options.

Neither superpower would concede being placed at such a disadvantage. As nuclear options proliferated, with an emphasis on prompt counterforce attacks against opposing nuclear capabilities, each superpower relied upon high alert rates and nuclear overkill, just in case the other decided to strike first. Since each side's deterrent was now indistinguishable from the forces tailored for a surprise attack, worst case, paranoid assumptions contoured domestic US debates. Right up until the demise of the Soviet Union, some hardliners continued to assert that Mikhail Gorbachev's "reforms" were a snare and a delusion designed to put Washington off-guard.³³

Arms controllers held quite different, but nonetheless, strange notions. They argued that the best insurance against nuclear attack was for both adversaries to refrain from defending against one. During the Cold War, US domestic politics delivered a split decision on the continuous battles between hawks and doves. Hardliners won the battles on improving offensive capabilities, while arms controllers succeeded in codifying mutual vulnerability by means of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Domestic support in the United States for the defensive measures required to accompany a damage limitation strategy was as questionable as the expensive technologies proposed for missile defense. The general public remained queasy with vulnerability, but this seemed to be an unavoidable condition of the superpower rivalry.

Concerns over vulnerability provided greater impetus to new and better offensive nuclear capabilities. Technical dilemmas in this domain, unlike those plaguing missile defenses, could be overcome. Delivery vehicles and warheads piled up on both sides in a contest in which numerology substituted for battlefield performance. Who was ahead and who was lagging behind? Troubling or reassuring answers could be found by pointing to different numbers associated with the nuclear competition.

The contradictions of cobbling together war-fighting plans with the acceptance of national vulnerability to nuclear attack were evident on many levels. On the offensive side of the ledger, the United States deployed land- and sea-based ballistic and cruise missiles that were suitable for damage limitation. The Kremlin pursued civil defense programs alongside land-based missiles that were also well suited for preemption. National leaders in both countries accorded the pursuit of treaties a high priority, but the resulting accords could not impair targeting plans, which were considered sacrosanct. The central

³³ For example, a vigilant Frank Gaffney warned that "the Machiavellian schemes" of Mikhail Gorbachev had brought the Soviets "closer to achieving their strategic goals than at any time since World War II." Cited by Hendrik Hertzberg, "Comment," *The New Yorker*, June 20, 2004.

contradiction, however, remained the juxtaposition of plentiful offense and national defenselessness.

The odd mix of an intense arms competition and the acceptance of national vulnerability reflected Cold War reality. Offensive advances were achievable; despite the claims of missile defense enthusiasts, effective defenses were not. As escalatory options multiplied, prospects of escalation control shrank. Because the offensive competition was so worrisome, insurance policies were needed to reinforce wise decision-making in times of crisis. One insurance policy was national vulnerability; another was mutual acceptance of the *status quo* in particularly sensitive areas. A third was an extended process of arms control negotiations premised on mutual recognition of the mutual hostage relationship. This acknowledgment was insufficient to stop the offensive competition, but it was essential to prevent the translation of nuclear war-fighting theories into practice. Throughout the Cold War, nuclear war-fighting plans remained locked in safes. The “balloon” never went up.

The prospect of fighting a nuclear war posed intolerable choices on national leaders. In contrast, the contradictions between offensive nuclear plans and national vulnerability were tolerable – until the Soviet Union collapsed and new threats of catastrophic terrorism arose against which national vulnerability was an utterly inappropriate response. Throughout the Cold War, different calculations applied. Offensive capabilities were geared to escalation dominance and damage limitation while paradoxically, the ABM Treaty was central to escalation control. These competing objectives could not be integrated, so they stood side-by-side.

US and Soviet leaders managed this balancing act at a political level, without delving into the inherent contradictions between escalation control and damage limitation. As the close student and practitioner of crisis management, McGeorge Bundy, wrote,

There is an enormous gulf between what political leaders really think about nuclear weapons and what is assumed in complex calculations of relative “advantage” in simulated strategic warfare. Think-tank analysts ... can assume that the loss of dozens of great cities is somehow a real choice for sane men. They are in an unreal world. In the real world of real political leaders ... a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one’s own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history.³⁴

Nuclear planners and bomb designers still inhabit a separate universe from political leaders. If contemporary evidence in the United States is needed in

³⁴ McGeorge Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (October 1969), pp. 9-10.

support of this proposition, one can look to the continued, albeit downsized, deployments of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, the maintenance of thousands of warheads on high levels of alert, and the Bush administration's interest in a new and improved "bunker busting" nuclear weapon. It is even less surprising that Russia (with the tables turned, now with inferior ground forces and having to defend Kaliningrad rather than the west having to defend West Berlin) would continue to rely on tactical nuclear weapons for forward defense. Political leaders in Washington and Moscow continue to allow their nuclear establishments to fiddle with designs – although not yet to resume nuclear testing – while intuitively understanding that planning and the authorization for use are entirely separate matters.

Try as they might, US deterrence strategists were never able to offer a persuasive case on how escalation could be controlled while seeking an advantageous outcome once the nuclear threshold had been crossed. These objectives remained at cross-purposes, because neither nuclear rival could achieve an overwhelming conventional and nuclear advantage over the other. Nor could either superpower achieve an effective defense that would permit the confident presumption of safety against nuclear retaliation. These conditions were not remotely achievable during the Cold War. Nor is it possible to envision how today, in vastly changed circumstances, a US or Russian leader could rationally conclude that the benefits of a single use of a nuclear weapon could possibly outweigh the negative consequences of breaking a taboo that has been respected for over half a century. A momentous decision of this kind is not made any easier by downsizing yields, improving earth penetration capabilities, or fiddling with weapon effects.

CONCLUSION

Will deterrence strategists and military planners in South Asia find solutions to dilemmas that have eluded their counterparts elsewhere? This analysis suggests that, despite the stark differences in the Cold War and South Asia cases, these dilemmas are extremely hard to manage by human beings with imperfect knowledge and control over events - regardless of their country of origin. A great deal of skepticism is warranted about attempts to escape from nuclear dilemmas by military means. The difficulties of escalation control remain hellish whether nuclear arsenals are excessive or minimal. Nor are the dilemmas of limited war any easier in South Asia than in Central Europe. As V.R. Raghavan has observed, "The reality of limited war is that the limits set on it make it difficult to gain a military victory, and war termination without victory closely resembles a defeat."³⁵

South Asian analysts were profoundly wrong in predicting a new era of stability and security once India and Pakistan had tested nuclear weapons. If they now assert with confidence that escalation can be successfully controlled

³⁵ Raghavan, "Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia," op. cit.

beneath the nuclear threshold, they might usefully be reminded of their earlier claims. Unlike Herman Kahn and US strategists, Indian and Pakistani authors do not indulge in analyses about how escalation can be managed once the nuclear threshold has been crossed. On what basis, then, can they be so confident that escalation can be controlled below the nuclear threshold? Are command and control networks and nuclear weapons “fail safe?” Will accidents not happen, or uncontrollable actors not intrude? Will misjudgments no longer occur?

This comparative analysis of the Cold War and South Asian cases suggests that, at the level of operational analysis, differences are stark but still not determinative. At a macro level of analysis are common factors highlighted. Despite the best efforts of theorists and analysts in the west and in South Asia, escalation is not easy to control. Optimistic plans for limited warfare assume that adversaries have grievances deep enough to fight over, and yet they will choose to fight by an agreed set of rules. We now know from studying war plans that this optimistic assumption was not valid during the Cold War. Nor does this assumption take into account the factor of unconventional warfare on the subcontinent. Another heroic assumption relates to battlefield management in the fog of war. It is a truism that the best-laid military plans need to be changed once a conventional war begins. What becomes of plans once the nuclear threshold is crossed?

The essence of wisdom during the Cold War was an agreement not to change the territorial *status quo* by coercive or military means. The essence of wisdom as well as escalation control in South Asia lies in the avoidance of crises that leave much to chance. The cycle of escalation in South Asia, as Richard Sisson and Leo Rose have documented, begins long before conflict erupts, fed by poisonous statements, intelligence mistakes, misperceptions, violence through proxies, and coincidence. Preventing this cycle from gaining traction is the best method of escalation control. As V.R. Raghavan has written, “Deterrence stability comes not through fears and anxieties but through reassurance.”³⁶ Reassurance, in turn, comes from the abandonment of dangerous policies with respect to Kashmir, the pursuit of reconciliation, and the negotiation, along with proper implementation, of nuclear risk-reduction measures.

This hard work is fervently expected of, but rarely performed by, national leaders on the subcontinent. The absence of peace making gives military strategists and deterrence theorists greater leeway. Strategic analysts in India and Pakistan have good reason to chafe at outsiders who extrapolate from Cold War experience. Yet they, too, draw on western concepts of deterrence, limited war, and escalation control, since western literature on these subjects provide the only basis for extrapolation. New nuclear rivals like India and Pakistan will find

³⁶ V.R. Raghavan, “South Asian Nuclear Dialogue,” *The Hindu*, September 1, 2000, available at http://bridget.jatol.com/pipermail/sacw_insaf.net/2000/000772.html.

their own way by accepting, rejecting, or adapting western constructs to suit their own national security interests.

This process is evolving as nuclear capabilities on the subcontinent mature. At this formative stage, many different outcomes are possible. A mixed picture is emerging which contrasts starkly with, while emulating certain aspects of, the US-Soviet nuclear rivalry. This confused picture is quite evident in attempts by theorists and military planners on the subcontinent to escape from deterrence, either by means of limited or unconventional warfare. Indian and Pakistani leaders will go about these pursuits in very different ways than the United States and Soviet Union, but the underlying impulse to seek advantage despite offsetting nuclear capabilities - or to avoid being placed at a disadvantage - is the same.

Indian and Pakistani strategic analysts who stress differences from, rather than emulation of, the US-Soviet nuclear rivalry can make a strong case. The author of this essay does not wish to elicit this reflexive response. A far more constructive rejoinder would be to build on the differences between these two cases to develop constructs that reduce nuclear dangers on the subcontinent. This essay suggests that the primary determinants of escalation control in South Asia are unlikely to rest on the conventional order of battle, finely-tuned military preparations, and a nuclear balance sheet that neither side can be sure of. Instead, escalation control is likely to rest primarily on the stakes involved in the dispute at hand, the risk-aversion or risk-taking nature of national leaders, and the extent to which they can control events. Factors beyond the control of national leaders in the depths of a crisis, such as the actions of extremist groups, accidents, independent decisions made up or down the chain of command, and good or bad luck, could be as or more important. Few western authors have ventured deeply into these domains. The time is ripe for the development of a new, cautionary theory of escalation control and limited war that reflects the complexities of the subcontinent.