

**The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperception,
and Escalation Control in South Asia**

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The United States and the Soviet Union managed to avoid nuclear and conventional warfare during the Cold War, while jockeying for advantage in myriad of ways, including proxy wars and a succession of crises that became surrogates for direct conflict. International relations and deterrence theorists aptly described this tense standoff in which much blood and treasure was expended—but without direct conflict—as the “stability-instability paradox.”

The stability-instability paradox was embedded in the enormity of the stakes involved in crossing the nuclear threshold. As posited by Western deterrence theorists, offsetting nuclear capabilities and secure, second-strike capabilities would induce special caution, providing the basis for war prevention and escalation control. Offsetting nuclear deterrents channeled the superpower competition into “safer” pursuits, the object of which would be to impose penalties on an adversary without inducing direct conflict.

The stability-instability paradox was identified rather early in the Cold War, as Western strategists weighed the consequences of a Soviet Union able to produce thermonuclear weapons. In 1954, B. H. Liddell Hart reflected a widely-held view that, “to the extent that the H[ydrogen]-bomb reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibility of limited war pursued by widespread local aggression.”² One of the reasons for rolling out the nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation during the Eisenhower administration was to warn against such adventurism.

The U.S. doctrine of massive retaliation was quickly qualified and subsequently shelved as a declaratory policy because it could not deter the unwanted eventualities that prompted its articulation. Precisely because retaliation by the Soviet Union as well as by the United States could be so massive, this threat would be insufficient. Worse still, threats of massive retaliation invited a bluff that could be called. In Glenn Snyder’s words, the Soviets could still engage in “a range of minor ventures which they can undertake with impunity, despite the objective existence of some probability of retaliation.”³ Massive retaliation gave way to the quest for nuclear war-fighting options and limited war doctrine, but these calibrations never really altered the fundamental precepts of the stability-instability paradox. Robert

¹ This essay was prepared for a conference hosted by the Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. Research assistance for this essay was provided by Christopher Clary, Sandhya Gupta, Kishore Kuchibhotla, and Aaron Wessells.

² Reprinted in *Deterrent or Defence* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960), p. 23.

³ *Deterrence and Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 226.

Jervis summarized this dilemma as follows: “To the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.”⁴

The purpose of this essay is to explore the extent to which the stability-instability paradox is applicable to the subcontinent, drawing upon the work of Western and South Asian strategists. One central tenet of the stability-instability paradox—that offsetting nuclear capabilities will increase tensions between adversaries—has already been amply demonstrated in South Asia. While India’s difficulties in Kashmir are rooted in poor governance and domestic grievances, Pakistan’s support for separatism and militancy in Kashmir has notably coincided with its acquisition of covert nuclear capabilities. Tensions between India and Pakistan have intensified further since both nations tested nuclear weapons in 1998. A nuclearized Subcontinent has already produced a succession of nuclear-tinged crises and one conflict that was limited in time, space, as well as in the choice of weapons used.

This high-altitude conflict above Kargil in 1999 was less than a full-blown war but far more than the skirmishing elsewhere along the Kashmir divide. A review committee assessing this conflict established by the Indian government asked, “Did the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998 rule out a major conventional war between them?” Its answer constituted a partial acknowledgement of the applicability of the stability-instability paradox to a distinctly non-Western setting: “Possibly not; but only up to a given threshold, which margin was exploited by Pakistan.”⁵

Whether the second central tenet of the stability-instability paradox—that, despite increased tensions and severe crises, nuclear-armed adversaries will avoid a major conflict or a nuclear exchange—applies to the Subcontinent cannot be answered at this juncture. So far, India and Pakistan, like the Soviet Union and the United States, have been fortunate to avoid a nuclear exchange. It is possible that this luck will hold and that New Delhi and Islamabad will make concerted, joint efforts to avoid crossing the nuclear threshold. And perhaps the applicability of the second tenet of the stability-instability paradox to South Asia will become more evident once India and Pakistan feel completely assured that they have acquired secure, second-strike capabilities. To date, however, the increased tensions and severe crises that have punctuated the Indian-Pakistani nuclear standoff have not yet prompted prudent policies of engagement and collaborative efforts to reduce nuclear risks.

Constructive engagement between nuclear adversaries can take time, as well as the chastening experience of flirting with disaster. The Cuban missile crisis occurred fourteen years after the Soviet Union joined the United States as a nuclear-weapon state. Within twelve months, both nations implemented a “hotline” agreement and negotiated a nuclear test ban treaty. The Kargil conflict occurred perhaps ten years after both India and Pakistan covertly acquired nuclear weapon capabilities.⁶ After

⁴ *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 31.

⁵ *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 22.

⁶ See George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 293–333.

Kargil, however, the leaders of both countries could not agree on a framework for resumed dialogue. Subsequently, they stopped talking to each other for nearly twelve months.

Two camps of deterrence theorists have formed over whether a nuclearized subcontinent will prevent a major conflict and foster escalation control.⁷ One camp might be called deterrence optimists.⁸ This camp naturally includes Indian and Pakistani strategists who chafed at Western efforts to prevent new members from joining the nuclear club and who draw directly from Western experience. As the former Minister of External Affairs of India, Jaswant Singh, wrote, “If deterrence works in the West—as it so obviously appears to, since Western nations insist on continuing to possess nuclear weapons—by what reasoning will it not work in India?”⁹ Similarly, Vijai Nair, an early Indian advocate of nuclear weapons, pointedly noted that, “[T]here has been no direct conflict between states of the Western world, endowed with nuclear power... while conflict has been the order of the day in the developing, non-nuclear Third World.”¹⁰

Another early conceptualizer of India’s nuclear deterrent, former Army Chief K. Sundarji, flatly predicted that nuclear deterrence

will add to stability and peace and that the only salvation is for both countries to follow policies of cooperation and not confrontation... A mutual minimum nuclear deterrent will act as a stabilizing factor. Pakistan will see it as counteracting India’s superior conventional power potential and providing a more level playing field. The chances of conventional war between the two will be less likely than before.¹¹

Sundarji’s optimism is reflected in Raj Chengappa’s insider account of India’s nuclear and missile decision-making, which is titled *Weapons of Peace*. In Chengappa’s narrative, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee is portrayed as thinking that nuclear testing by India and Pakistan would mean an end to war on the Subcontinent.¹² Similarly, Jasjit Singh, a leading Indian commentator on strategic affairs, has argued that, with the advent of offsetting nuclear capabilities on the subcontinent, “Deterrence will continue, but on a higher level. I don’t think we are going to see a slide toward instability. I don’t think anybody will allow it to happen.”¹³

⁷ For a clear exposition of these alternative views, see Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

⁸ These terms are adapted and borrowed from Scott Sagan, *Ibid.*, and Peter R. Lavoy’s review essay of the debate between Sagan and Waltz, “The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation,” *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 695–753.

⁹ “Against Nuclear Apartheid,” *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 5 (1998), p. 43.

¹⁰ *Nuclear India* (Hartford, WI: Spencer & Lancer, 1992), p. 79.

¹¹ “Proliferation of WMD and the Security Dimensions in South Asia: An Indian View,” in William H. Lewis and Stuart E. Johnson, eds., *Weapons of Mass Destruction: New Perspectives on Counterproliferation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1995), p. 59.

¹² *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India’s Quest to be a Nuclear Power* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 8.

¹³ Interview with Jasjit Singh, “One on One,” *Defense News* (July 27–August 2, 1998), p. 22.

This view was widely echoed in Pakistan. At a symposium convened by the Institute of Policy Studies in 1995, General K.M. Arif declared that, “The nuclear option will promote regional peace and create stability,”¹⁴ while Air Marshal Zulfikar Ali Khan opined that nuclear weapons “make wars hard to start.”¹⁵ The accomplished Pakistani diplomat, Abdul Sattar, concluded that, “attainment of nuclear capabilities by Pakistan and India has helped promote stability and prevented dangers of war despite the crises that have arisen from time to time...Self-interest itself should persuade Pakistan and India to exercise due restraint. Continuance of responsible conduct is likely also because it could gain greater tolerance of their nuclear policies.”¹⁶

During this period, a former Chief of the Pakistan Army, General M. Aslam Beg, summarized the prevailing view in Pakistan that, “It is the nuclear deterrent that has kept wars in South Asia at bay.”¹⁷ The “father” of Pakistan’s nuclear program, Abdul Qadeer Khan, is reported to have told *The Times of Oman* that, “Anyone will have to think [a] hundred times before they try to indulge in any misadventure against Pakistan. I don’t care if somebody disagrees, but I consider nuclear weapons as weapons of peace”—echoing similar views within the Indian nuclear establishment chronicled by Chengappa. “A nuclear Pakistan,” in A.Q. Khan’s view, “means safety, security and peace of mind.”¹⁸

Assessments of the stabilizing consequences of offsetting nuclear capabilities have not been confined to deterrence theorists in South Asia. According to Sumit Ganguly,

Despite this tension-ridden relationship and contrary to a number of dire warnings, it is unlikely that India and Pakistan are on the verge of another war, let alone a nuclear war... The possession of nuclear weapons on both sides has, in all likelihood, introduced elements of caution among strategic elites in the region.¹⁹

Likewise, Devin T. Hagerty concluded that, “There is no more ironclad law in international relations than this: nuclear weapon states do not fight wars with one another.”²⁰ Nuclear weapons on the subcontinent, in Haggerty’s view, “deters nuclear and conventional aggression, but not the unconventional military operations characteristic of guerrilla warfare.”²¹ Ashley Tellis’ exhaustive review of India’s emerging

¹⁴ “Retaining the Nuclear Option,” in Tariq Jain, ed., *Pakistan’s Security and the Nuclear Option* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1995), p. 123.

¹⁵ “Pakistan’s Security and the Nuclear Option,” in Jain, ed., p. 138.

¹⁶ “Nuclear Issues in South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective,” in Jain, ed., p. 89.

¹⁷ *Indian and Pakistani Security Perspectives* (Rawalpindi: Foundation for Research on National Development and Security, 1994), p. 73.

¹⁸ “N-arms weapons of peace,” *The Hindu*, August 26, 2002.

¹⁹ “Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Origins, Consequences, and Prospects” in Shalendra D. Sharma, ed., *The Asia-Pacific in the New Millennium: Geopolitics, Security, and Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asia Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, 2000), p. 252–3; also see Ganguly, “Indo-Pakistani Nuclear Issues and the Stability/Instability Paradox,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 18, (1995): 325–34. In *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947*, Ganguly argues that the stability/instability paradox will hold for the foreseeable future because “neither side has the requisite capability to pursue a decapitating first strike against the other.” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 108.

²⁰ *The Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: Lessons from South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 184.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

nuclear posture also concludes with an upbeat assessment: “A reasonably high degree of deterrence stability currently exists within the greater South Asia region... It is not unreasonable to expect that the acknowledged presence of nuclear weapons on all sides would inhibit any interactive sequences that could lead to serious forms of deterrence breakdown in the future.”²²

Those who hold diametrically opposed views might be called deterrence pessimists. This camp works from very different assumptions and arrives at deeply troubling conclusions. In this view, the situation in South Asia, like that during the Cold War, is far from stable and could lead to inadvertent escalation. As Robert Jervis notes, “It is rational to start a war one does not expect to win...if it is believed that the likely consequences of not fighting are even worse. War could also come through inadvertence, loss of control, or irrationality.”²³ A close observer of South Asia, Neil Joeck, argues that,

India and Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities have not created strategic stability [and] do not reduce or eliminate factors that contributed to past conflicts...Far from creating stability, these basic nuclear capabilities have led to an incomplete sense of where security lies. Nuclear weapons may make decision-makers in New Delhi and Islamabad more cautious, but sources of conflict immune to the nuclear threat remain. Limited nuclear capabilities increase the potential costs of conflict, but do little to reduce the risk of it breaking out.²⁴

Similarly, V.R. Raghavan is far from sanguine about the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations:

The conclusions drawn in New Delhi from the Kargil experience are significant. Instead of seeking a stable relationship on the basis of nuclear weapon capabilities, Pakistan has used nuclear deterrence to support aggression. Kargil indicated that armed with nuclear weapons, Pakistan has increased confidence that it could raise the conflict thresholds with India. It demonstrated a willingness to take greater risks in conflict escalation.²⁵

Raghavan concludes that “the probability of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan is high, in the event the two countries engage in direct military conflict.”²⁶ Moreover, as P.R. Chari has observed, “The nuclearized environment in South Asia has not informed the leaderships in both countries to observe restraint in making provocative and inflammatory public declarations.”²⁷ In this view, the combination of harsh rhetoric, provocative action, the absence of trust and communication channels between Indian and Pakistani leaders invites destabilizing actions and escalation.

²² *India’s Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica: RAND, Project Air Force, 2001) p. 743.

²³ “The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons,” in Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 29.

²⁴ “Maintaining Nuclear Stability in South Asia,” *Adelphi Paper* 312 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 12.

²⁵ “Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Fall–Winter 2001), p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁷ P.R. Chari, “Nuclear Restraint, Risk Reduction, and the Security-Insecurity Paradox in South Asia,” in Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne, eds., *The Stability-Instability Paradox: Nuclear Weapons and Brinkmanship in South Asia*, Report No. 38 (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, June 2001), p. 20.

Nuclear pessimists can also be found within the ranks of veteran Pakistani observers of tension on the Subcontinent. Talat Masood has written that, “It would be dangerous for either country to presume that its nuclear capability provides a cover for high-risk strategies or gives immunity from an all-out conventional war.”²⁸ Columnist M.B. Naqvi has concluded that, “The point is that nuclear weapons, by their mere presence, have actually proved to be a deeply destabilizing factor.”²⁹

Several deterrence and international relations theorists straddle these camps. Henry Kissinger has written that, “Nuclear weapons have rendered war between countries possessing them less likely—though this statement is unlikely to remain valid if nuclear weapons continue to proliferate into countries with a different attitude toward human life or unfamiliar with their catastrophic impact.”³⁰ John Mueller argues that, “Nuclear weapons neither crucially define a fundamental stability nor threaten severely to disturb it.”³¹ In Mueller’s view, “what deters is the belief that escalation to something intolerable will occur, not so much what the details of the ultimate unbearable punishment are believed to be.”³² Some notable deterrence optimists with a deep understanding of tensions in South Asia have also introduced important qualifiers to their relatively upbeat assessment. Ashley Tellis, for example, notes that “weak state structures” and “deficient strategic decision making” skewed by “severe motivational and cognitive biases” could produce a breakdown in nuclear deterrence in a deep crisis.³³

This author lines up with the camp of deterrence pessimists—at least until the governments of India and Pakistan commit to constructive engagement and make concerted efforts to reduce nuclear risks. To begin with, the earliest stages of offsetting nuclear capabilities between states with significant grievances are inherently the most dangerous. During this period, lines of communication tend to be unreliable, and crisis management procedures are especially *ad hoc*. As Richard Betts has noted, “Confusion can be used against an enemy by increasing his uncertainty and encouraging caution, but it also widens the range for miscalculation.”³⁴

In the early stages of developing nuclear arsenals, the size and disposition of each side’s nuclear deterrent are mostly opaque to the other, which can prompt worst-case assessments during an intense crisis. Another core element of strategic stability identified by Western deterrence strategists—secure second-strike capabilities—is difficult to constitute during the early stages of a new nuclear rivalry. In this dangerous passage, the United States and the Soviet Union went eyeball-to-eyeball over Berlin and Cuba, and the two pairings of contiguous nuclear-weapon states—China and the USSR as well as India

²⁸ “Our multiple challenges,” *Dawn* (June 22, 2002), accessed online at <http://www.dawn.com/2002/06/22/op.htm>.

²⁹ “Facts about Indo-Pak impasse,” *The News International* (March 6, 2002), accessed online at <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/mar2002-daily/06-03-2002/oped/o4.htm>.

³⁰ “America at the Apex: Empire or Leader?” *The National Interest*, no. 64 (Summer 2001), p. 13.

³¹ “The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Post-War World,” in Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 3.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³³ *India’s Emerging Nuclear Posture*, pp. 743–4.

³⁴ *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1987), p. 211.

and Pakistan—both fought border clashes soon after these adversaries demonstrated offsetting nuclear capabilities.

The concepts of escalation control and stable nuclear deterrence presume rational decisions by rational actors, even in the deepest crisis. There is, however, a surplus of irrational actors in South Asia who would view the advent of crisis as an opportunity rather than as a problem to be contained. Deterrence optimists also presume that “Murphy’s Law” does not apply to nuclear weapons—at least not to the extent that an accident or a chain reaction of miscalculation, error, chance, or misuse of authority would lead to a crossing of the nuclear threshold. These presumptions were rather generous during the Cold War, as have been amply documented.³⁵

Additional reasons for pessimism are rooted in the military balance in South Asia, which was stable in the past, but which is becoming less so over the past decade. With respect to the nuclear equation, it is hard for Indian and Pakistani officials to predict with accuracy the holdings of the other side. Because opacity is commonly viewed as essential to deterrence and because national technical means are mostly lacking, unduly optimistic calculations on one side could well be paired with the other’s undue pessimism. Misestimates could be destabilizing as well as stabilizing. Even if both adversaries are aware of the nuclear balance and acknowledge its equality, there are no guarantees against adventurism.³⁶ Indeed, the first tenet of the stability-instability paradox predicts the opposite result.

Sumit Ganguly argues that the stability-instability paradox will hold for the foreseeable future in South Asia because “neither side has the requisite capability to pursue a decapitating first strike against the other.”³⁷ Indeed, India’s nuclear arsenal is widely presumed to be secure from attack, given its large landmass. But capabilities at this early stage in the nuclear competition are opaque, and intentions are not presumed to be honorable. A “recessed” deterrent or a “force in being”³⁸ that cannot be constituted or deployed because of a decapitating strike might be unusable.³⁹ Much of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal and command and control hierarchy, on the other hand, could be subject to prompt targeting and preemptive strikes from India, at least in the theoretical calculations employed by nuclear strategists. The more New Delhi moves toward a ready arsenal, thereby addressing worst-case assessments regarding decapitation, the more Islamabad must contemplate—and compensate for—its nightmare scenario of preemption. One side’s quest for stability at this stage in the nuclear competition is likely to feed the other’s concerns over instability.

Meanwhile, the conventional military balance is also fluid, and changing markedly in India’s favor. From 1995-1999, South Asian military expenditures grew more than for any region of the world,

³⁵ See, for example, Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1993).

³⁶ Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail*, p. 214.

³⁷ *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 108.

³⁸ These terms have been borrowed from Jasjit Singh and Ashley Tellis, respectively.

³⁹ See, for example, Rahul Bedi, “A credible nuclear deterrent?” *Frontline*, April 11, 2003, pp. 97-98.

with India's growth rate three times that of Pakistan.⁴⁰ This disparity, which could enable the Indian military to employ new military tactics in future conflicts with Pakistan, has grown even more appreciably in recent years. Nowhere is the growing disparity in conventional military capabilities more apparent than with respect to airpower. From 1993 to 2002, India received or licensed production of 10 Mirage-2000s, 10 MiG-21s, 10 MiG-29s, 190 SU-30s, 4 TU-22s, 54 MiG-27s, 2 Harriers, and 52 Jaguars. During this period, Pakistan acquired or placed orders for 97 F-7s, 40 Mirage-5s, and 10 Mirage-3s. It is also working with China to produce domestically 150 FGA combat aircraft.⁴¹ Growing Indian air superiority has ramifications for escalation control and for the stability of nuclear deterrence on the Subcontinent in at least two major respects. First, the attrition of the Pakistani Air Force in air-to-air combat in a "limited war" scenario could constitute a "red line" that cannot be predicted with assurance. Second, Pakistani military planners would view Indian air power as the quickest and most accurate means for deep strikes against nuclear, as well as conventional targets.

More reason for deterrence pessimism can be found in the absence of nuclear risk reduction measures on the subcontinent. The author has argued elsewhere that ten key commandments of nuclear risk reduction evolved over time to help keep the Cold War from becoming white hot.⁴² These commandments are:

- Don't change the territorial status quo in sensitive areas by use of force.
- Avoid nuclear brinkmanship.
- Avoid dangerous military practices.
- Put in place special reassurance measures for ballistic missiles and other nuclear forces.
- Implement properly treaty obligations, risk-reduction, and confidence-building measures.
- Agree on verification arrangements, including intrusive monitoring.
- Establish reliable lines of communication, between political leaders and between military leaders.
- Establish redundant and reliable command and control arrangements as well as intelligence-gathering capabilities to know what the other side is up to, especially in a crisis.
- Keep working hard on these arrangements. Improve them. Don't take anything for granted.
- Hope for plain dumb luck or divine intervention.

⁴⁰ India's military expenditures rose an average of 8.8 percent from 1995 to 1999; Pakistan's rose an average of 2.9 percent. In 1999, the last year for which official U.S. data are available, India spent \$11.3 billion on military expenditures; Pakistan spent \$3.5 billion. [U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Verification and Compliance, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1999-2000* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2002), pp. 2-3.]

⁴¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers and licensed production of major conventional weapons: Exports to India," available at http://projects.sipri.se/armstrade/INDIA_MPTS_93-02.PDF and "Transfers and licensed production of major conventional weapons: Exports to Pakistan," available at http://projects.sipri.se/armstrade/PAK_MPTS_93-02.PDF

⁴² "Nuclear Risk Reduction: Is Cold War Experience Applicable for South Asia?" in Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne, eds., *The Stability-Instability Paradox*, pp. 1-14.

It is unsettling to note that none of the key elements of nuclear risk reduction (with the possible exception of good fortune) are now present in South Asia.⁴³ Instead, Pakistan remains strongly opposed to the status quo in Kashmir, the contiguous territory that has sparked previous wars and almost daily friction between the Indian and Pakistani forces that are deployed along this divide. Both governments have resorted to brinksmanship over Kashmir, India by mobilizing and threatening war, Pakistan by initiating the Kargil incursion and by its continued commitment to a Kashmir policy that relies on militancy to punish India and to leverage favorable outcomes.

In this sense, both countries seem to have copied a page from early Cold War play books on how to demonstrate resolve: “[T]he best way, perhaps the only way, for us to avert not only defeat but unnecessary escalation is to demonstrate clearly that our readiness to take risks is not less than theirs.”⁴⁴ Brinksmanship leads to dangerous military practices, which are a common occurrence along the Kashmir divide, including the overrunning of border posts and the “routine” use of small arms and mortars as well as artillery firing. Aerial incursions take place, notwithstanding signed “confidence-building” measures designed to end such activity.

Deterrence optimists argue that brinksmanship in South Asia is highly ritualized and even pragmatic. As Satu Limaye has written,

Pakistan and India’s brinksmanship is not wild-eyed but designed to meet policy objectives. Pakistan, as the weaker state in the bilateral relationship, ratchets up tensions over Kashmir to garner external (mainly U.S.) pressure on India to come to the bargaining table. India uses coercive diplomacy to bring U.S. pressure to bear on Pakistan to halt support for militants and their infiltration into Kashmir. Both states seek to achieve their ends without war: Pakistan because it might lose, India because it might not win... In using brinksmanship, both India and Pakistan ultimately want to be held back while having the United States push their interests forward.⁴⁵

There is much insight in this analysis but it presumes a high degree of control over events by national leaders. The “pragmatic,” self-interested use of brinksmanship leaves much to chance. As Thomas C. Schelling cautioned, “Brinksmanship involves getting onto the slope where one may fall in spite of his own best efforts to save himself, dragging his adversary with him.”⁴⁶ Responses to repeated instances of brinksmanship could change and Washington’s ability to broker satisfactory outcomes could be

⁴³ Desmond Ball, Hans Bethe, Bruce Blair and others compiled a shorter list of key measures: do not use of deadly force against an adversary; do not force an adversary to choose between humiliation and escalation; do not use military forces to undermine an adversary in geographic areas he deems vital; do not use force against an adversary’s ally; do not use force to dramatically alter the status quo in a sensitive region; and do not initiate horizontal escalation. [*Crisis Stability and Nuclear War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Peace Studies Program, 1987), p. 62.]

⁴⁴ Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 128.

⁴⁵ “Mediating Kashmir: A Bridge Too Far,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002-3), p. 159.

⁴⁶ *The Strategy of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 200.

diminished from one crisis to the next. If any of the three parties decides to change the rules of the game, outcomes could be surprisingly different.

For both tenets of the stability-instability paradox to be in place, thereby preventing unintended escalation, lines of communication need to be reliable, and the messages conveyed over these channels need to be trustworthy. As noted above, the United States and the Soviet Union began to address this requirement after the Cuban missile crisis. In contrast, after the Kargil crisis, communication between India and Pakistan worsened, and then ceased altogether.

The paucity of communication across borders further impairs intelligence assessments. These judgments have been badly wrong in the past, resulting in severe consequences. Most notably, the initiation or outcome of wars—and sometimes both—have come as a surprise to one side or the other. For example, the outbreak of the 1999 high-altitude conflict above Kargil came as a surprise to India; its outcome came as a surprise to Pakistan. Robert Jervis and others reminded us during the Cold War that, “Deterrence succeeds or fails in the mind of the attacker.”⁴⁷ But Indian and Pakistani leaders have repeatedly misestimated each other’s intentions.

Escalation control requires a careful and correct reading of one’s adversary. Regrettably, problems of misperception on the subcontinent appear to be growing as the wall of separation between India and Pakistan becomes higher and thicker. One leading Indian strategic analyst, Raja Menon, acknowledges this danger, while identifying its source as “the belief among some Indian academics in the exaggerated resolve of the Pakistanis.”⁴⁸ In Menon’s view, “an escalatory spiraling out of control could only grow from a Pakistani initiative.”⁴⁹ There is much room for misjudgment in this analysis. The war on terrorism declared by Washington provides further grounds for misjudgment by Pakistan and India. As Polly Nayak has noted, “Each has misread its closer ties to the United States as evidence that Washington has embraced its perspective. Each has treated the intense engagement and military presence of the United States as insurance against escalation to war.”⁵⁰

The ten-month-long twin mobilizations in 2002, during which the Government of India demanded the cessation of acts of terrorism abetted by Pakistan and the hand-over of leading militants, ended without satisfaction on either count. The resulting lessons learned in both countries could well increase confusion or misjudgments.

⁴⁷ Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 125.

⁴⁸ *A Nuclear Strategy for India* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 152.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵⁰ “Reducing Collateral Damage to Indo-Pakistani Relations from the War on Terrorism,” *Policy Brief*, No. 17 (Washington: The Brookings Institution, September 2002), p. 2.

Within India and Pakistan, official post-mortems predictably put a positive spin on the crisis.⁵¹ President Musharraf declared that, “We have defeated an enemy without fighting a war.” He then added that, if Indian troops “took even a step across the international border or LoC, we will not only be in front of them, we will surround them. It will not remain a conventional war.”⁵² Prime Minister Vajpayee declared that the extended Indian troop mobilization “sent [a] ‘strong message’ to Pakistan to end cross-border terrorism... ‘I can tell you that the message is working. We’ll make sure that it works.’”⁵³ The Indian Army Chief of Staff during the crisis, General S. Padmanabhan, declared the mobilization “a boon for the armed forces in upgrading training along with equipment availability.” In addition, Padmanabhan noted that infiltration across the LoC had markedly declined, and that a successful state election had been held in Jammu and Kashmir.⁵⁴

Prominent strategists, retired military officers, and journalists in India and Pakistan have differed sharply on the lessons learned from this extended standoff. The national security establishment in Pakistan was mostly upbeat after India’s exercise in coercive diplomacy. According to Shireen M. Mazari, the Chair of the government-funded Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad, “The reason for the present dissipation of the military threat is primarily the result of Pakistan calling India’s bluff and the major power realizing the need to move India away from its game of brinkmanship.”⁵⁵ Some Pakistani military officers viewed the Indian climb-down as evidence of cowardice, and as prompting serious morale problems in the Indian Army.⁵⁶

Indian commentators offered a mixed assessment, with some seeing the glass half-full. The influential editor of *The Indian Express*, Shekhar Gupta, took solace from the confrontation: “The Pakistani pledge to abjure terrorism now has some international guarantees. Their nuclear bluff has been called—finally we have shown we cannot be blackmailed as we were in 1990.”⁵⁷ Similarly, the dean of Indian commentators on national security, K. Subrahmanyam, argued that India’s extended troop mobilization was a success insofar as it served “to compel the United States to apply pressure on Pakistan to promise a visible and permanent end to cross-border terrorism.”⁵⁸ In contrast, several retired military officers were scathing in their assessment of Indian coercive diplomacy, as was General Afsir Karim, editor of *Aakrosh* (and former editor of the *Indian Defence Review*), in a published interview:

⁵¹ See, for example, “Troop withdrawal vindicates our stance, says Musharraf,” *Daily Times*, October 26, 2002; “Objective of Army deployment achieved, says Fernandes,” *The Hindu*, October 28, 2002; “Indian troops deployment failed, says Yusuf,” *The Dawn*, December 11, 2002.

⁵² “Warning forced India to pull back troops, says President,” *The Dawn*, December 31, 2002. This statement was subsequently “clarified” by Pakistan’s military spokesman as meaning “unconventional forces and not nuclear or biological weapons.” (“Gen shoots mouth off, backfires,” *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2002.)

⁵³ “Troop build-up sent strong message to Pak: PM,” *The Indian Express*, December 13, 2002.

⁵⁴ “Gen shoots mouth off, backfires,” *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2002.

⁵⁵ “The real intent?” *The News International*, July 24, 2002.

⁵⁶ Interviews with the author, October 7–13, 2002.

⁵⁷ “One month after Kaluchak: Five lessons we learnt, can’t afford to forget,” *The Indian Express*, June 15, 2002.

⁵⁸ “Premature Pullback vs. Army Fatigue,” *The Times of India*, October 29, 2002.

[T]he troops became mere pawns in the hands of politicians intent on pursuing their own agenda... The troops sweated it out on the borders in extremely harsh environments while the rest of us went about its [sic] normal business of celebrating festivals and holding fashion shows... The aim of coercive diplomacy is basically to demand a particular change in an adversary's policies with a real and credible threat of devastating punitive action in case of noncompliance... India, for obvious reasons, posed no such threat to Pakistan... Not surprisingly, cross-border terrorism continued unabated and Pakistan seemed far from being coerced.⁵⁹

Outlook magazine's national security correspondent, V. Sudarshan, heard similar sentiments from prominent members of the Indian national security establishment. He described "seething anger" in the armed forces against coercive diplomacy that, in the words of one source, "achieved so little with so much." The recently retired Vice Chief of Staff of the Indian Army, General Vijai Oberoi, is quoted as saying, "Instead of terminating it as that point in the graph where the gains from mobilization were headed downwards, we carried it on like a Hindi film." Vijai Nair added, "The fact that you deployed the entire military and did not take punitive action against terrorists demonstrated to all that New Delhi does not have the political will to use the means it has deliberately created to secure India when the chips are down."⁶⁰

These divergent views do not bode well for war prevention and escalation control. When both Indian and Pakistani leaders claim to have succeeded at brinksmanship, they may be inclined to continue such practices. Confidence in being able to stare down India appears widespread within the Pakistani national security establishment. At the same time, significant elements of the Indian national security establishment have expressed deep dissatisfaction with threats that are not backed up by the use of force. This juxtaposition could lead to consequential misjudgment, particularly when India's vibrant democracy will present Pakistani leaders with mixed messages about the wisdom of using force to deal with terrorism originating across the Kashmir divide. The initiation of war could again come as a surprise to one side. Since both military establishments express confidence in achieving their objectives in the event of another war relating to Kashmir, one will be proven wrong in the event of another war.

An intense conventional war—or worse—could result if escalation control measures fail. One principle mechanism for escalation control has been timely and effective U.S. intervention, but this may prove difficult if Washington is preoccupied elsewhere. And even if high-ranking U.S. administration officials are available to intervene, another extraction of promises from Islamabad is unlikely to hold much sway in New Delhi. As the Director of the United Service Institution of India, Satish Nambiar, has written, "If anyone in the system seriously believes that the assurances apparently given by General

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "Mirage 2001-02," *Outlook*, October 28, 2002.

Musharraf to American interlocutors and commended for acceptance by our leadership are anything more than expediency to tide over the current pressure, they should have their heads examined.”⁶¹

With Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee’s decision to resume ties with Pakistan in May 2003, the Government of India has again opened the door to a resumption of dialogue—depending on whether acts of terrorism and infiltration across the Kashmir divide subside. If talks were to resume and if past practices are repeated, it is unlikely that dialogue would result in formalized nuclear risk-reduction accords that are properly implemented. Previous Pakistani governments have linked such accords to desired progress on Kashmir. In the past, Pakistan’s guardians of national security have viewed nuclear risk-reduction measures as tradable commodities, not as essential goods. For significant progress to occur on nuclear risk reduction, either Islamabad must loosen its linkage strategy, or New Delhi must seriously tackle the Kashmir issue.

The Bush administration’s role in promoting nuclear risk reduction on the subcontinent will also help determine whether a resumption of dialogue will be successful. In the wake of a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament that led to joint mobilization for war, and a subsequent attack on an Army housing complex in Jammu, the administration of President George W. Bush worked intensely to help Prime Minister Vajpayee and Musharraf avoid a war that neither wanted. However, the expectations of both sides resulting from the Bush administration’s intervention—that India would consent to a resumption of bilateral dialogue and that Pakistan would permanently cease its facilitation of infiltration across the Kashmir divide—went unmet for twelve months.

Vajpayee’s initiative to resume diplomatic relations, if followed by appropriate steps by Pakistan along the Line of Control, can provide a new opportunity for progress on a broad range of bilateral issues. While positive movement on minor issues can help to contain a crisis triggered by acts of terror, small but useful steps are unlikely to provide sufficient insulation against predictable acts of militancy unless major issues of contention are also tackled in a substantive and constructive way. And even significant efforts to tackle neuralgic issues can be sidelined by a catalytic act of terror perpetrated by a militant group based in Pakistan.

In the event of another major crisis, the increased readiness of nuclear capabilities can be expected, including the movement of missiles to complicate targeting and to signal resolve. Nuclear capabilities that are in a high state of readiness or are in motion to reduce their vulnerability could become more susceptible to accidents or misuse. Deterrence optimists tend to discount accidents and inadvertence as contributing factors in crossing the nuclear threshold, but accidents happened during the Cold War. Fortunately, none produced a mushroom cloud. There were also decisions made by local commanders during deep crisis that could have led to misjudgments and grave misfortune.⁶² Accidents,

⁶¹ “Compromise That Contains Promise,” *The Indian Express*, June 20, 2002.

⁶² See Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, ch. 2; James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Laurence Chang and Peter

inadvertent steps, and misjudgments during crisis could also occur in South Asia. Moreover, the writings of deterrence optimists usually discount problems associated with the possibility of domestic turmoil and its impact on command and control. These concerns were not prominent during the Cold War.

There are additional reasons for concern about escalation control in the event of a catalytic act of terrorism. The Government of India has publicly declared that, "Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage."⁶³ As Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes has warned,

We have been saying all through that the person who heads Pakistan today, who is also the whole and sole in-charge of that country, 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 wants to survive then it would not do so.⁶⁴

The Government of Pakistan has not released a draft or official nuclear doctrine for public consumption, but one might reasonably infer from the statements of senior military figures that they, too, endorse a massive response to Indian strikes against sensitive targets or the crossing of Pakistani "red lines." During the ten month-long dual troop mobilizations in 2002, President Musharraf traveled to the front and announced that "even an inch" of Indian incursion across the Kashmir divide "will unleash a storm that will sweep the enemy... The people of Pakistan have always had faith in the ability of the armed forces to inflict unbearable damage to the enemy."⁶⁵ In his address to the nation on March 23, 2002, Musharraf declared, "By Allah's Grace Pakistan today possesses a powerful military might and can give a crushing reply to all types of aggression. Anybody who poses a challenge to our security and integrity would be taught an unforgettable lesson."⁶⁶ In a subsequent address to the nation of May 27, 2002, Musharraf announced, "We do not want war. But if war is thrust upon us, we would respond with full might, and give a befitting reply."⁶⁷

One might dismiss these statements as hyperbole, but the speaker will be called into account if these remarks are mere bluff and if that bluff is called. The public declarations of Indian and Pakistani leaders endorsing massive retaliation are reminiscent of the tense Cold War standoff in mid-1950s. These threats are likely to be as ineffectual on the Subcontinent as during the Eisenhower administration. Massive retaliation does not provide an answer to the bloodletting in Jammu and Kashmir nor to

Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999). Also see: "The Havana Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis," Press Release from the National Security Archive, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/CWHP/BULLETINS/b1a1.htm>.

⁶³ Press release, Prime Minister's Office, "Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Progress in Operationalizing India's Nuclear Doctrine," January 4, 2003.

⁶⁴ "Pak. Will be erased if it nukes India: Fernandes," *The Hindu*, January 28, 2003.

⁶⁵ "Musharraf vows to 'unleash a storm' if India attacks," *The News International* (May 30, 2002).

⁶⁶ Available online at http://www.infopak.gov.pk/President_Addresses/Pres_23Marc.htm

⁶⁷ Available online at http://www.infopak.gov.pk/President_Addresses/presidentadress-27-5-2002.htm

ambiguous cases that result in the release of radioactivity. The critique of massive retaliation by Henry Kissinger and other Cold War deterrence strategists still rings true:

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 a direct attack threatening the national existence...A deterrent which one is afraid to implement when it is challenged ceases to be a deterrent.⁶⁸

As Thomas C. Schelling wrote, “When the act to be deterred is inherently a sequence of steps whose cumulative effect is what matters, a threat geared to increments may be more credible than one that must be carried out either all at once or not at all.”⁶⁹

A declaratory doctrine of massive retaliation seems particularly ill-suited to the circumstances surrounding a low-yield detonation whose source might not be easily ascertained. Such an event could be caused by an accident, a terrorist act, or an inadvertent strike executed by an air force pilot under orders to avoid known nuclear targets. Under such circumstances, parallel and reinforcing doctrines of massive retaliation constitute an impediment to escalation control. Joint adherence to massive retaliation doctrines during the early stages of the nuclear competition in South Asia could result, as Maria Sultan has noted, in deterrence that is based “not on the credibility of the second-strike capability of either side, but on the effectiveness of the first strike.”⁷⁰

The threat of massive retaliation could have utility when the crossings of red lines that would result in the use of nuclear weapons are clear and bright, but such clarity is elusive in international relations. Indeed, it is in the interest of national leaders not to be too precise about the actual location of red lines, since to do so could invite unwelcome actions that approach, but do not cross, these thresholds. Consequently, advertised red lines could be overdrawn and purposefully vague. Take, for example, the interview of General Khalid Kidwai, Director-General of the Strategic Plans Division, by two Italian researchers. In this interview, Kidwai, who oversees Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent, is reported to have said that Pakistan would resort to nuclear weapons’ use in the event that:

- India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory
- India destroys a large part either of its land or air forces
- India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan

⁶⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. pp. 133-4.

⁶⁹ *The Strategy of Conflict*, p. 42.

⁷⁰ “Deterrence and limited war,” *The News International*, June 3, 2002.

- India pushes Pakistan into political destabilization or creates a large scale internal subversion⁷¹

These red lines represent unacceptable thresholds relating to losses of territory, military capability, economic viability, and political stability. As such, they reflect obvious Pakistani sensitivities. How Indian authorities might translate these markers into war-fighting guidelines, however, is anything but obvious. For example, Pakistan's vital lines of communication run perilously close to its international border. India does not need to capture a large part of Pakistani territory in order to deliver a devastating blow. And what constitutes "large" losses of air power? The blockade of Karachi could take many weeks to have a severe impact on the Pakistani economy. When might this red line be crossed? The political stability threshold is the most difficult of all to calibrate, since Pakistan could be destabilized either in the absence of, or resulting from, a war with India.

Rather than being clear and bright, red lines can be hidden from view. They could be inadvertently embedded in tactical operations that are not expected to result in the detonation of nuclear weapons. During the "quarantine" of Cuba in the 1962 missile crisis, a red line could have been crossed when a U.S. naval destroyer used depth charges to compel a Soviet submarine to the surface. This red line was avoided when one of three officers on board the sub refused to concur with unauthorized, ad hoc procedures to use a nuclear weapon in extremis.⁷² Analogous events could be imagined in the context of the use force for limited military objectives in South Asia.

During the Cold War, the non-viability of massive retaliation as a nuclear doctrine against less than all-out threats led the United States to explore the concept of limited war. For such contingencies, nuclear doctrine evolved to emphasize limited nuclear strikes, tactical nuclear weapons, and a wide range of employment options. Escalation control in the event of a crossing of the nuclear threshold was a conundrum that was never satisfactorily resolved. Some Western deterrence theorists found solace in the pursuit of escalation dominance: superior nuclear capabilities at each rung of the ladder and advantageous nuclear force ratios in the event of all-out war would presumably dissuade the Kremlin from escalating or persuade it to capitulate. Western deterrence strategists inferred a similar animus to the Soviet nuclear posture.⁷³

Despite considerable intellectual effort, Western deterrence strategists found no politically acceptable or militarily plausible way out of the conundrum. It was hard to envision how, if the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union had risen to the point of nuclear detonations, the construct of escalation dominance could offer a satisfactory outcome. Instead, the pursuit of

⁷¹ The wording of these thresholds is that of the Italian interviewers. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, *Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan* (Como: Landau Network, January 2002), p. 5.

⁷² Kevin Sullivan, "One word from nuclear war," *International Herald Tribune*, October 14, 2002.

⁷³ See, for example, Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965); Paul H. Nitze, "Assuming Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 2 (January 1976), pp. 208–232; Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks it Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary* 74, no. 1 (July 1977), pp. 21–34.

advantage would likely become an invitation to uncontrolled escalation between two nuclear superpowers. Neither one side's dominance nor the other's surrender would likely be mutually acceptable outcomes. If equilibrium could somehow be found between these extremes, it would depend far more on escalation control measures than on dominant escalatory potential. The conundrum of escalation control was resolved during the Cold War by avoiding direct conflict and by engaging in the nuclear risk reduction measures enumerated above.

The juxtaposition of India's nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation with a conventional war-fighting doctrine focusing on limited war presents quite different, but no less challenging dilemmas for escalation control. New Delhi's interest in limited war is borne, in part, out of frustration over Pakistan's use of unconventional methods to bleed India in Jammu and Kashmir. Frustration grew after the successful, but self-punishing, tactics used by Indian forces to repel Pakistani intruders from the heights above Kargil. As the Indian Army Chief during this conflict, V.P. Malik, later observed,

though India and Pakistan are nuclear nations, it is not true to say there cannot be a conventional war between them. Kargil proved that. There is a threshold under which a conventional war is possible.⁷⁴

General Malik's successor, General S. Padmanabhan, echoed these thoughts:

I am looking at the whole range that constitutes the spectrum [of conflict]. You have low-level conflict on the one end and on the other you have the nuclear war scenario. In between this spectrum is a whole amount of strategic space. This is the space in the middle for conventional operations...Nuclear war fighting is perhaps the last thing in anybody's mind. What we are looking at is to get an optimal return from conventional warfare.⁷⁵

The penalties of the stability-instability paradox have been borne disproportionately by India. Offsetting nuclear capabilities appeared to rule out full-scale conventional war, while facilitating Pakistan's support for militancy across the Kashmir divide. At the same time, India's declaratory policy embraced nuclear minimalism and de-emphasized limited nuclear options. Can limited war objectives be backed up by a doctrine of massive retaliation in South Asia? This is unexplored territory for both Western deterrence theorists and for Indian strategists.

The twining of limited war and massive retaliation could become a very unstable mix. To begin with, limited war objectives are inherently incompatible with maximal penalties. To risk all for modest objectives appears nonsensical. And if the penalty is not credible, risk-taking by one side will likely prompt risk-taking by the other. Backstopping limited war with the threat of massive retaliation would

⁷⁴ The Rediff Interview with General V. Prakash Malik, Part II: "Pakistan thought the Indian Army's back was broken," Rediff On the Net, July 27, 2001, accessible at <http://www.rediff.com/news/2001/Jul/27inter.htm>

⁷⁵ "Army Will Be Prepared to Tackle Nuclear Threat," *Hindustan Times*, September 29, 2000, cited in Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture*, p. 44.

therefore appear to run the familiar risks of escalation control. Western deterrence strategists have dwelled at length on this dilemma. Neither adversary, as Robert Jervis has written, “can confidently move into an area of significant concern to the other without great risk of incurring very high costs—if not immediately, then as a result of a chain of actions that cannot be entirely foreseen or controlled.”⁷⁶ Conceiving of nuclear weapons as a firebreak does not necessarily prevent escalation. As Bernard Brodie observed, “The more that confidence in the firebreak is built up, the less is each side restrained from committing larger and larger conventional forces within the limits of its capabilities.”⁷⁷

The Government of India has been caught on the horns of this dilemma ever since the Subcontinent was nuclearized. Opposed to endorsing limited nuclear options and the other paraphernalia of nuclear deterrence that drove U.S. and Soviet arsenals to dizzying heights, New Delhi has yet to find favorable methods to counter Pakistan’s tactics in Kashmir. The device chosen after the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament—keeping battle-ready forces in the field for ten months—is not one that lends itself to repetition, unless one chooses to wage war. Otherwise, the credibility of the threat would be further devalued, while confirming Brodie’s observation, above. And if the full mobilization of conventional forces is no longer credible, how can the threat of massive retaliation successfully alter an adversary’s behavior? The frustrations prompted by these excursions have no doubt contributed to Indian interest in limited war options, which are now awkwardly mated to an unlimited nuclear threat. Because this juxtaposition is inherently not credible, the possibility of unintended escalation is always present, lending further credence to the concerns of deterrence pessimists, especially under conditions where official dialogue is absent.

One key element of escalation control, as Morton Kaplan wrote in *The Strategy of Limited Retaliation*, is the “ability of the opponents to see the legitimacy of each other’s claims.”⁷⁸ Indian and Pakistani leaders have not shown such generosity of spirit toward one another since Prime Minister Vajpayee’s 1999 visit to Lahore in search of reconciliation was followed by General Musharraf’s incursion above Kargil. Subsequently, Indian politics have been marked by an upsurge in Hindu nationalism, while Musharraf’s experiment in “tailored” democracy has produced a tattered garment and a greater role for Pakistan’s religious parties. As political elders leave the scene in both countries, there appears to be a decreasing capacity to see the legitimacy of neighboring claims.

Escalation control also requires the ability to reign in wild men eager to pursue violent agendas. Western deterrence theorists never made the acquaintance of the Jaish e-Mohammed or the Lashkar e-Toiba. Jihadi wild cards are now mixed into the deck of India-Pakistan relations, along with Hindu chauvinists who abet the mass murder of Muslims and mosque demolition. Catalytic acts of terror can again place India and Pakistan at the knife’s edge. Concerns over terrorists acquiring fissile material are present in South Asia, as elsewhere. The dilemma of escalation control was avoided after the attack on

⁷⁶ *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 148.

⁷⁷ *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*, p. 124.

⁷⁸ (Princeton: Center of International Studies, 1959), p. 3.

the Indian parliament largely because the Indian prime minister wished to avoid war. A future Indian prime minister, faced with another major provocation, might choose a different course of action.

The stage is set for another test of the stability-instability paradox on the subcontinent. Deterrence optimists could be proven right. After all, India and Pakistan have experienced severe crises, but national leaders have studiously avoided a conventional war that could result in a crossing of the nuclear threshold. National leaders are well aware of the adverse economic consequences of limited warfare and of their responsibilities to avoid unintended escalation. In the event of another crisis, third parties will seek to intervene quickly, if they are given time to do so before hostilities erupt.

Nonetheless, deterrence pessimists have the stronger arguments at present. Deterrence theory is being severely tested on the subcontinent. Nuclear risk reduction measures are not in place. When bilateral channels of diplomacy were open, neither capital engaged seriously on each other's core concerns. Subsequently, official dialogue between India and Pakistan has ceased for almost a year. Both governments have embraced nuclear doctrines of massive retaliation and politico-military plans that rely heavily on brinkmanship. If New Delhi and Islamabad continue down this path, a breakdown in deterrence would not come as a surprise.

Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee has again offered to go down a very different path with Pakistan. A resumption of bilateral dialogue can follow in due course. All eyes are now on the Line of Control, to see whether President Musharraf's pledge to halt permanently Pakistan's support for infiltration across the Kashmir divide will be honored. Escalation control and nuclear risk reduction efforts begin—or are subverted—along the Kashmir divide.