



## **Nuclear Crisis, Escalation Control, and Deterrence in South Asia**

**P.R. Chari**

*Working Paper  
Version 1.0*

*August 2003*

Copyright©2003  
11 Dupont Circle, NW  
Ninth Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
phone 202.223.5956  
fax 202.238.9604  
[www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org)

# Nuclear Crisis, Escalation Control, and Deterrence in South Asia

*P.R. Chari*

## SETTING OUT THE PROBLEM

It would be banal to reiterate that Indo-Pak relations are crisis-prone. Uncontrolled the two powers could fall into conflict and, following their reciprocal nuclear tests in May 1998, these conflicts could acquire a nuclear dimension; hence, nuclear deterrence in South Asia is fragile. Kashmir has been the chief source of conflict in the several wars fought between India and Pakistan. These include the Kashmir conflict in 1947–48, the India-Pakistan wars in September 1965 and December 1971, and the Kargil conflict in May–July 1999.<sup>1</sup> These were “shooting wars.” The Kashmir issue remains unresolved. Firings across the border, infiltration of militants, and sporadic artillery duels are routine occurrences along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, and forebode more conflicts in future.

Several other crises have punctuated the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan after they became independent in 1947, including several major ones that could have erupted into conflict; the two most serious related to the Brasstacks Exercise in 1986–87<sup>2</sup> and the Kashmir-related crisis in the spring of 1990.<sup>3</sup> In the genre of minor crises can be included the Siachen glacier dispute that arose in 1984, bearing the ever-present danger of escalation into a major conflict,<sup>4</sup> and several alarms in 1984–85 caused by fears in Pakistan of an impending Indian attack on the Kahuta nuclear facility.<sup>5</sup> Following the Kashmir crisis in 1990 there were crises after the March 1993 Bombay bomb blasts that followed the destruction of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Kargil conflict has been the subject of several recent books. See Ashok Krishna and P.R.Chari (eds.) *Kargil: The Tables Turned* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001). Early studies include Praveen Swami, *The Kargil War* (New Delhi: Left World Books, 1999); Col. Ravi Nanda, *Kargil: A Wake-up Call* (New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1999); Jasjit Singh (ed.) *Kargil 1999* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1999); *Guns and Yellow Roses: Essays on the Kargil War* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The only book length studies of the Brasstacks crisis are Ravi Rikhye, *The War that Never Was: The Story of India's Strategic Failures* (Delhi: Chanakya Publishers, 1988); and Kanti P. Bajpai, P.R.Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Stephen P. Cohen, Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crisis in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995). Also, “War Games or War? Operation Brass Tacks,” in P.N.Hoon, *Unmasking Secrets of Turbulence: Midnight Freedom to a Nuclear Dawn* (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The only book length studies on this crisis are Devin T. Hagerty, *The Theory and Practice of Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia* (Pennsylvania, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); and P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema and Stephen P. Cohen, *Perception, Politics, and Insecurity in South Asia: The compound crisis of 1990*: (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). Important essays on the alleged nuclear dimension of this crisis include Stephen P. Cohen, *1990: South Asia's Useful Nuclear Crisis* (paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Chicago, February 6–7, 1992); Seymour M. Hersh, “On the Nuclear Edge”, *The New Yorker* (March 29, 1993); Devin T. Hagerty, “Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: The 1990 Indo-Pakistani Crisis”, *International Security* 20, no. 3 (Winter 1993–94); and “Conflict Prevention and Risk Reduction: Lessons from the 1990 Crisis,” in Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne (eds.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> A perceptive account of this dispute may be seen in Robert G. Wirsing, “The Siachen Glacier Dispute: Can Diplomacy Untangle It?” *Indian Defence Review* (July 1994).

<sup>5</sup> These crises are described in Bajpai, et al, *Brasstacks and Beyond*, pp. 9–10.

the Babri Masjid,<sup>6</sup> the October 1993 “capture” of the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar by militants,<sup>7</sup> and the May 1995 arson of the Charar-e-Sharif shrine by militants in Kashmir.<sup>8</sup>

However, the involvement of nuclear installations in the Indo-Pak crises of 1984–85 does not qualify these events as nuclear crises. Similarly speculative reports have suggested that a nuclear dimension imbued the Brasstacks and Kashmir-related 1990 crisis, but evidence here is tenuous. However, the Indo-Pakistani crises that followed their reciprocal nuclear tests in May 1998 had a nuclear dimension; they include the Kargil conflict and the border confrontation following a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. The situation that arose could have erupted into a “shooting war.”

The danger of Indo-Pakistani crises escalating across the nuclear threshold is apparent, but a thesis has gained currency in India that limited wars can be fought under the rubric of nuclear deterrence. As stated by George Fernandes, India’s Defence Minister, “Pakistan did hold out a nuclear threat during the Kargil War last year. But it had not absorbed the real meaning of nuclearization; that it can deter only the use of nuclear weapons, but not all and any war.... [S]o the issue was not that war had been made obsolete by nuclear weapons, and that covert war by proxy was the only option, but that conventional war remained feasible though with definite limitations.”<sup>9</sup> India and Pakistan have conducted proxy wars and *sub rosa* operations against each other and fought a limited war under the aegis of nuclear weapons. Hence, there is optimism that limited conflicts can be fought and will not escalate to general war and further to a nuclear exchange, despite the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust and convictions regarding the irrationality of the “Other.”

It is proposed to initially discuss the major issues raised in this essay: crisis, escalation control and deterrence. They would be applied to the Indo-Pak standoff by undertaking a *tour d’horizon* of their major crises over the eighties after a nuclear dimension appeared in the calculus. How these crises were terminated and why they did not escalate further would also be debated. What these crises portend for escalation control and the establishment of deterrence in South Asia would finally be reviewed to draw appropriate conclusions. The Western literature would be applied to the Indo-Pak situation to understand its similarities and differences from other contestations.

## ESTABLISHING BENCHMARKS

Defining the key words in this essay—crisis, escalation control and deterrence—would now be attempted.

---

<sup>6</sup> Briefly described in P.R.Chari, *Indo-Pak Nuclear Standoff: The Role of the United States* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> A short description of this incident is available in Sumit Ganguly, *The crisis in Kashmir: portents of war, hopes of peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 119–20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124–27.

<sup>9</sup> George Fernandes, “Opening Address,” in Jasjit Singh (ed.), *Asia’s New Dawn: The Challenges to Peace and Security* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2000), xvii.

## Crisis

The empirical evidence informs that states do not war in an impetuous manner. Wars are shaped by a process of decisions and actions deriving from leadership appreciations of threatening circumstances, and are generally preceded by a crisis marked by a threat, the prospect of war, and a sense of urgency. Crises begin with events that lead policy makers to believe that an action or threatened action by the “Other” constitutes a threat to their national interests, status in the international community, or ability to stay in power. Policy makers then consider themselves to be under time constraints, suggesting an environment of high risk and short lead-times, making crisis decisions qualitatively different from other decisions.<sup>10</sup> Brecher and Wilkenfeld believe that an international crisis involves “a situational change characterized by an increase in the intensity of *disruptive interactions* between two or more adversaries, with a high probability of *military hostilities* in times of peace (and, during a war, an *adverse change* in the *military balance*). The higher-than-normal conflictual interactions destabilize the existing relationship of the adversaries...”<sup>11</sup> [Emphasis in original] They further describe a foreign policy crisis as “a situation with three necessary and sufficient conditions deriving from a change in a state’s external or internal environment. All three are perceptions held by the highest level decision-makers of the actor concerned: *a threat to basic values*, along with the awareness of *finite time for response* to the external value threat, and a *high probability of involvement in military hostilities*.”<sup>12</sup> [Emphasis in original]

These general principles are applicable to the Indo-Pak standoff, but three elements distinguish them from other such contestations. First, the empirical evidence informs that crises in South Asia can erupt suddenly without warning, reflecting the volatility and unpredictability of Indo-Pak relations for reasons that lie primarily in their mutual elite perceptions. Second, Indo-Pakistani crises have often led to an internal challenge being mounted against their ruling elites. The 1971 war ended disastrously for Pakistan leading to the excision of Bangladesh, emergence of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and receding of the military leadership into the background. This occurred again after the Kargil conflict unleashed a course of events terminating in the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s civilian government and re-establishment of military rule in Pakistan. Parenthetically, the Indian government perceived the terrorist attack on Parliament House in December 2001 as an assault on its ruling elite; hence the border confrontation in 2001–02 was designed, in part, to shield its ruling coalition from being labelled inept and toothless. Third, the India-Pakistan and India-China nuclear dyads are inextricably linked. Theoretically, a two-against-one nuclear crisis is conceivable pitting Pakistan and China against India, but also raising complicated issues pertaining to its trilateral structure. Significantly, the international system has no experience of dealing with such trilateral situations. For its part, India needs to plan for a two-front nuclear crisis.

---

<sup>10</sup> Drawn from the summary of crisis and conflict in Richard N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crises* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981) pp. 7–12 to illustrate the 1990 crisis in P.R.Chari et al. *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The compound crisis of 1990*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *Crisis, Conflict and Instability* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

A definitional problem arises as we focus on Indo-Pakistani nuclear crises. First, it is necessary that a credible nuclear threat to deter the adversary from undertaking an impermissible action should have been held out. The credibility of this threat and the likelihood that the resulting crisis could have proceeded across the nuclear threshold constitutes the fuller dimensions of a nuclear crisis. The mere presence of nuclear weapons is not sufficient. Second, basic differences obtain between the two countries in recognizing a nuclear crisis. Pakistan is prone, as the weaker conventional power, to believe that its deterrent dissuaded India from adventurism,<sup>13</sup> this simultaneously elevates its military, which controls Pakistan's nuclear program, in its domestic polity. India promotes its deterrent by hortatory declarations largely made for domestic political purposes.

A brief history of nuclear deterrence in the Western and South Asian understanding could be discussed at this stage. Following World War II nuclear weapons were incorporated into American operational plans as more efficient explosives to be used in the same fashion as artillery. These naive beliefs needed reevaluation after the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons and the ability to launch long-range attacks. Albert Wohlstetter then drew attention to the 'delicate' nature of the American-Soviet strategic balance whilst emphasizing the vulnerability of the U.S. Strategic Command.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, this cautionary essay encouraged notions that victory was possible in a general nuclear war, rather than sensitizing those in authority to its catastrophic nature. This led to the theory of 'flexible response' enunciated by the incumbent U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, who claimed that general nuclear war could be approached like conventional military operations, and hence the "principal military objectives...should be the destruction of the enemy's military forces, not of his civilian population."<sup>15</sup> "Counter-force" was thus born in contradistinction to "counter-city" strategy, in effect, making nuclear conflict more thinkable. The basic problem with counterforce, which remains unresolved to this day, is that there can be no guarantee that all the nuclear weapons in the adversary's arsenal could be destroyed, and that a sufficient number would not survive to inflict unacceptable damage on the attacker. It might be emphasized that the decision to use nuclear weapons will be made by political and/or military leaders, who are aware that such crucial decisions would need to be taken on insufficient and contradictory intelligence reports, and the difficulties in entering a conflict for which no previous experience or guidance exists.

A further assumption of counter-force strategy was that the Soviets would not attack American cities but would restrict the nuclear exchange to military targets, since the larger U.S. nuclear forces could, in retaliation, ravage the Soviet mainland. This line of thinking allowed construction of the following scenario: Country A launches a counterforce attack with tactical nuclear weapons on country B's military assets. Country B now has the option of restricting the nuclear exchange to country's A's military assets, or to escalate the conflict by attacking country A's cities, which would invite a devastating counterattack upon its own cities. Country A's initial attack would thus present country B with a

---

<sup>13</sup> Agha Shahi, Zulfiqar Ali Khan and Abdul Sattar, "Securing Nuclear Peace", *The News International* [Pakistan], Internet Version (October 5, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 2 (January 1959), pp. 211–234.

<sup>15</sup> Expressed in a speech delivered in Ann Arbor, Michigan (June 16, 1962). See Robert S. McNamara, "Defense Arrangements of the North Atlantic Community," *Department of State Bulletin* 47 (July 9, 1962), pp. 67–8.

Hobson's choice to either limit the nuclear exchange or escalate it to the general war level. No certainty is possible obviously that country B will fight a nuclear war on the lines desired by country A. In fact, it is arguable that the weaker country B may feel impelled to undertake an all-out second strike against country A, knowing that its smaller nuclear forces are vulnerable, and that its destruction depends on A's goodwill. There would also be an incentive for country B to initiate a nuclear exchange by attacking A's military targets *and* cities in the hope of foiling any possible counterattack. This line of thinking imbued the Soviet leadership at that time. Sokolovskii, for instance, propounded that, "The basic method of waging the [future] war will be by massive missile blows to destroy the aggressor's instruments for nuclear attack and, simultaneously, to destroy and devastate on a large scale the vitally important enemy targets making up his military, political, and economic might, to crush his will to resist, and to attain victory within the shortest possible time."<sup>16</sup> Similar conclusions could have been reached by the Indo-Pak leadership.

Concepts like "no-first-use" declarations and "credible minimum deterrence" highlighted in India's draft nuclear doctrine—which has since been officially accepted—can be argued to be anomalous. Briefly, declaratory confidence-building measures (CBMs), like "no-first-use" pledges would, most likely, break down in actual conflict situations. For a deterrent to fulfill, moreover, the objective of credibility at minimum levels creates a definitional problem of identifying "minimum."<sup>17</sup> These anomalies are significant because, as perceptively noted, "nuclear equations are most unsettled and tension-producing at the outset of any such nuclear pairing."<sup>18</sup> The empirical record of early American-Soviet nuclear relations informs us that the beginning of their nuclear adversarial relationship was marked by a large number of crises. They occurred over Berlin (1948), Korea (1952), Vietnam (1954), Taiwan (1956), again Berlin (1961), and culminated in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Such crises have occurred between India and Pakistan after their nuclear tests in May 1998, which dramatizes the fact that the problems associated with acquiring nuclear weapons in South Asia closely resemble those accosting the superpowers during the early Cold War period.

## Escalation Control

Despite these crises the need to use violence to gain advantage over the adversary has traditionally informed military establishments. Conflict escalation could be deliberately pursued. An involuntary and inadvertent escalation of crisis or conflict, however, can be hazardous, and could be dictated by an inexorable march of events exhibiting a Guns of August syndrome. In theory, two escalation control policies are possible. "The first is to have 'escalation matching' capabilities: forces that can fight a war at whatever level the enemy chooses to fight. The hope is that this ability would deter...

---

<sup>16</sup> V.D. Sokolovskii, *Soviet Military Strategy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 313.

<sup>17</sup> These inconsistencies are detailed in P.R. Chari, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Confused Ambitions," *The Nonproliferation Review* 7, no. 3 (Fall–Winter 2000), pp. 123–35.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Krepon, "South Asia: A Time of Trouble, A Time of Need," in Jill R. Junnola and Michael Krepon (eds), *Regional Confidence Building in 1995: South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, December 1995), p. 5.

The other policy, ‘escalation dominance,’ refers to having superiority at every possible level of combat. Because such superiority would shift the burden of risk of escalation...it is hoped that escalation dominance would keep wars limited if they occur, and would also minimize their likelihood.”<sup>19</sup> Neither policy can ensure that escalation will be successfully controlled, which is of the essence to avert nuclear catastrophe.

U.S. policy during the Cold War envisaged the need for its NATO allies to upgrade and strengthen their conventional forces against the Warsaw Pact. This was designed to “raise the nuclear threshold” and make nuclear conflict less likely, but the European nations preferred to shelter under the American nuclear umbrella and were loathe to incur the expense involved. Consequently, American strategy was premised on using nuclear weapons to derive a capacity for “escalation dominance” defined as “a capacity, other things being equal, to enable the side possessing it to enjoy marked advantages in a given region of the escalation ladder...”,<sup>20</sup> which further envisaged conventional and nuclear war fighting being conducted along defined rungs of violence. The drawing up of different scenarios for a nuclear conflict by Herman Kahn on the assumption that it would progress in an orderly fashion is quite bizarre, despite his conceding that “many of the rungs can be skipped. One, might, for example, go directly from ‘crisis’ to some kind of ‘all-out’ war. Nor is the order sacred...”<sup>21</sup> This made imaginative use of a situation that was without parallel or precedent, namely visualizing the actual fighting of a nuclear war. However, the uncertainty of planning for a logical escalation sequence led to alternative theories that envisaged shifting the onus of decision onto the other side. The other side would be presented with the choice of either continuing with the impermissible action that led to initiation of the nuclear exchange or discontinuing such action to ensure a termination of the exchange. This concept drew on Schelling’s thesis: “To share an increase in risk with an enemy may provide him an overpowering incentive to lay off. Preferably one creates the shared risk by irreversible manoeuvres or commitments, so that only the enemy’s withdrawal can tranquilize the situation; otherwise it may turn out to be a contest of nerves.”<sup>22</sup>

Brecher, for his part, argued that, “Stated formally, escalation signifies a step-level jump in the pattern of hostility, a qualitative increase in the intensity or a change in type of disruptive interaction. For that to occur the trigger must be a much more powerful inducement to change—in disruptive interaction between adversaries, in decision-makers’ perceptions of threat, time pressure and war likelihood, and in crisis management. The most powerful catalyst is violence, actual, threatened or implied.”<sup>23</sup> Applying these findings to Indo-Pak crises Brecher noticed that the triggers for their escalation were their location in a “protracted conflict setting,” “geographic proximity” of the two adversaries, “heterogeneity between

---

<sup>19</sup> The Harvard Nuclear Study Group, *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) pp. 147–8. The members of this group included Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffmann, Samuel P. Huntington, Joseph S. Nye and Scott Sagan.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 290.

<sup>21</sup> Herman Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (New York: Avon Books, 1962), p. 195. In this early work Kahn visualised 16 rungs in his escalation ladder; later he envisaged 44 rungs.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1960/1980), p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Brecher, *Crises in World Politics: Theory and Reality* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), p. 371.

them” (essentially disparate ruling systems and political systems), and “several cross-cutting issues in dispute.”<sup>24</sup>

The problem with such mechanistic approaches to nuclear conflict can be underlined by referring to Clausewitz. He notes that, “So we see how, from the very outset, the absolute, the ‘mathematical’ as it is called, no longer has any firm place in military calculations; from the outset there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good and bad luck, which...makes War of all branches of human activity the most like a gambling game.”<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, he states, “The Commander of an immense whole finds himself in a maelstrom of false and true information, of mistakes made through fear, negligence, pre-occupation, contravention of his authority, from either mistaken or correct motives, from ill-will, true or false sense of duty, indolence or exhaustion, of accident which no man could have foreseen.”<sup>26</sup> The irrationality of planning an orderly nuclear conflict is illumined by Clausewitz’s perceptive wisdom; it would always remain an enterprise shrouded in uncertainty. The “fog of war” and the plethora of true, false and contradictory intelligence that assails the Commander make this clear. The availability of sophisticated command and control arrangements and early warning systems allows some greater confidence, but the large number of casualties due to “friendly fire” in the Second Gulf War informs us of their inadequacies.

It is dubious whether the esoteric issues embedded in the concepts of escalation dominance and escalation control have been thought through by the strategic establishments in South Asia. Nothing is known in the public domain of how these problems, inherent to nuclear war fighting and escalation control, are being approached. The Indian nuclear decision-making apparatus seems greatly concerned with the political utility of nuclear weapons, but has accorded relatively little thought to their military implications. The reverse seems to be happening in Pakistan. These contrary approaches highlight the reality that nuclear weapons are firmly in the hands of civilian leaders in India, while the military controls these weapons in Pakistan. A basic asymmetry therefore obtains in the way the two countries perceive the political and military utility of nuclear weapons.

Avoiding the transition from crisis to conventional and nuclear conflict in South Asia is the burden of this essay. An important role is thereby accorded to escalation control. The platitude is often expressed that conventional weapons have killed millions, but nuclear weapons have maintained the peace. It has been urged that Indo-Pak wars have been fought in a “civilized” (surely an oxymoron) way. As evidence, it has been noted that India and Pakistan reached “an ‘informal’ agreement not to use their respective air forces in the open, desert-like area of the Rann of Kutch.... A similar agreement led to a ‘city avoidance’ strategy once war broke out in September 1965. Both sides carefully refrained from bombing each other’s population centers. Also, both sides adhered to a tacit agreement not to bomb dams and irrigation facilities. Although no explicit arrangements were made prior to the 1971 war, they had virtually assumed the stature of informal norms. Despite the significance of the stakes involved in the

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 369–70.

<sup>25</sup> Cited from various sections of *On War*, in Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 312.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 312–13.

1971 war, neither side breached the previous arrangements.”<sup>27</sup> In truth, the escalation control exhibited by the two countries during the 1965 and 1971 conflicts by excluding population centers as targets for air attack was largely informed by an awareness of their mutual vulnerabilities. Neither India nor Pakistan could have defended their cities and retained the “war wastage reserves” needed to prosecute the war. These circumstances have not changed, nor have the perceptions of the two military leaderships altered. But it should also be noted that the subcontinent has suffered more casualties and economic disruption due to unconventional conflict than in all its conventional wars aggregated together; the establishment of nuclear deterrence has not led to the end of conflict, but its channelling into subterranean modes.

In the Western literature, nuclear weaponry has been classified into tactical (battlefield), theater, and strategic, indicating their possible use to categorize nuclear conflict. In South Asia, it is difficult to establish such distinct classes of nuclear weaponry, given the short distances to high value targets in both countries; hence tactical or theater weapons in the Western context would be considered strategic in South Asia. However, many questions remain unanswered in either the Western or South Asian contexts: How can escalation control be ensured? How can nuclear conflict be controlled? How can it be confined within declared limits? There is no definite reply to these questions, which perplexes the strategic community and governments alike.

The belief however that low-yield tactical nuclear weapons could be used in the battlefield during an Indo-Pak nuclear crisis,<sup>28</sup> or to launch counterforce attacks on military and economic targets, while expecting that the conflict will not escalate to general war, is feckless. There are several reasons for this assertion.

Firstly, the “firebreak” distinguishing nuclear and conventional conflict must be maintained since the entry of nuclear weapons into the battlefield introduces an entirely new, qualitative dimension. Undoubtedly, some conventional weapons can resemble “mininukes” in their destructive capabilities, but the latter are unique in that they can cause instant annihilation and long-term radiation effects on present and even unborn generations. Above all, the use of any kind of nuclear weapons presages escalation leading on to the use of more powerful weapons that could annihilate cities and major economic targets.

Secondly, there is no guarantee that the adversary will not escalate nuclear conflict straightaway by launching massive counterattacks on population centers. As graphically argued in a Pugwash Symposium some twenty-five years ago, “I do not believe that any scenario exists which suggests that nuclear weapons could be used in field warfare between two nuclear states without escalation resulting... [T]here is no Marquess of Queensberry who would be holding the ring in a nuclear conflict... [N]o one

---

<sup>27</sup> Sumit Ganguly, “Mending Fences,” in Michael Krepon and Amit Sevak (eds.), *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building and Reconciliation in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> This was the subject of a cover story by a popular New Delhi magazine in mid-June 2002 during the border confrontation. See “Small is Scary,” *Outlook* (June 10, 2002), pp. 42–6. It should be pointed out that the U.S. National Academy of Sciences has noted that India and Pakistan probably need to conduct additional tests to develop low-yield compact weapons in the 1-2 KT or lower range, although India has demonstrated this capability with its sub-kiloton tests in May 1998. Greater certainty would be possible by conducting sub-critical or low-yield tests clandestinely; however both countries are presently constrained by their self-proclaimed moratorium on nuclear testing. U.S. National Academy of Sciences, *Technical Issues Related to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002), available online at <http://www.nap.edu/html/ctbt/>.

has yet suggested a mutually agreed mechanism for controlling escalation on a battlefield. Until we are assured that there could be one, we have to see any degree of nuclear destruction as part of a continuous spectrum of devastation.”<sup>29</sup> The problem that rules cannot govern the fighting of a war, anticipated by Clausewitz two centuries ago, remains unresolved. Moreover, for a nuclear conflict to proceed under established rules assumes that an understanding on its contours exists between the adversaries. Should this exist, the natural question would arise: why should they enter a conflict at all?

Thirdly, it has been further urged that, “A war of attrition, even if it were technically feasible, cannot be in the interest of the weaker side. Against a numerically superior opponent, the sensible strategy would be attacking cities, perhaps ‘controlling’ the response by destroying some smaller towns first...whatever the significance of the notion of superiority in a war confined to military targets, there can be little doubt that a saturation point is soon reached when civilian populations become the objective.”<sup>30</sup> Mutual assured destruction ultimately upholds the edifice of nuclear deterrence; war-fighting scenarios configuring nuclear weapons lack credibility in the real world.

This logic was probably informing the Indian Defence Minister’s assertion during the Indo-Pak border confrontation crisis that, “We [India] could take a strike, survive and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished.”<sup>31</sup> Such declamations suggest that, despite the commendable restraint shown by the Indo-Pak leadership to defuse earlier conflicts, the entry of nuclear weapons introduces an entirely new dimension into the calculus; hence wisdom suggests that defusing a crisis before it triggers a conventional conflict is of the essence, but preventing its escalation to the nuclear level must be firmly ruled out.

## **Nuclear Deterrence**

Some further discussion of the concept of nuclear deterrence is in order. Bernard Brodie’s magisterial injunction at the dawn of the nuclear era is as relevant today as when it was formulated: “Thus far the chief purpose of a military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have no other useful purpose.” Understandably, military, nuclear and political establishments find it irksome to reconcile themselves to a dispensation where they are in the possession of essentially unusable weapons, essentially designed to dissuade the adversary from using his own weapons. The assiduous search therefore proceeds to discover some innovative uses for nuclear weapons to make them more “conventional” and credible. Strategists have been fascinated with the concept of credibility, which urges that possessing nuclear weapons will not provide deterrence unless the will to use them is also demonstrated; for this purpose an image of nuclear devastation has to be etched on the adversary’s mind in the belief that, “A deterrent which one is afraid to implement when it is

---

<sup>29</sup> Lord Zuckerman, “Forum: Remarks Made at a Special Session with the Prime Minister of Canada,” in Franklyn Griffiths and John C. Polanyi (eds.) *The Dangers of Nuclear War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 164–65.

<sup>30</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, “American Strategic Doctrine and Diplomacy,” in Michael Howard (ed.), *The Theory and Practice of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 282.

<sup>31</sup> “India Could Take a Strike and Survive, Pakistan Won’t: Fernandes,” *Hindustan Times* (December 30, 2001).

challenged ceases to be a deterrent.”<sup>32</sup> The need arises consequently to reiterate threats of condign punishment if the adversary commits some impermissible act to make the nuclear arsenal seem more usable. The need also arises to suggest a willingness to fight limited and calibrated conventional wars under the aegis of the nuclear umbrella. Parenthetically, political gains are deemed to accrue within the domestic polity by adopting such intransigent policies. These are undoubtedly arguable propositions, since the need for strategic reassurance of the adversary must also be ensured, lest he be alarmed into taking irreversible measures that lead to nuclear confrontation. Ensuring nuclear deterrence by urging that nuclear weapon use is credible to avert crisis without precipitating a conflict is comparable to dancing on a knife-edge at the rim of a precipice. As perceptively noted, “crisis in the conventional era could also escalate, but the possibility of quick and total destruction means that the risk, while struggling near the brink, of falling into the abyss is greater and harder to control than it was in the past.”<sup>33</sup>

It should be emphasized that these dilemmas are not recent. The basic problems and axioms of the nuclear age were recognized at the beginning of the nuclear age. They comprised “...the impossibility of defense; the hopeless vulnerability of the world’s major cities; the attraction of a sudden attack; and the necessity of a capability for retaliation. These were inklings of the debates that were to dominate strategists in the coming decades: the danger of a successful first strike against nuclear forces; the impossibility of deterring madmen; and the paradox of intensive defensive preparations taking on the appearance of a provocative act.”<sup>34</sup> These truths are of universal applicability, like the “iron laws” of economics. The beliefs in some nationalist circles in South Asia, therefore, that such problems and axioms of the nuclear age are an Occidental imposition and that a unique South Asian approach is possible are plainly naive. A material and psychological chasm obtains between nuclear and conventional weapons. Nuclear weapons impose a logic of their own, and it is futile to urge that South Asian strategists can address these dilemmas in some unique fashion.

It could however be suggested that there is little need to deify the need for ‘credibility’ by exponential increases in nuclear armories, which led the United States and the Soviet Union to accumulate some 50,000 nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War. A nuclear war-fighting capability may be necessary to establish the viability of the deterrent, but this could be achieved at far lower levels. The commitment to “sufficiency” and minimalism that imbues South Asian thinking might be occasioned by the unavailability of resources, but there is little reason for India and Pakistan to emulate the other nuclear weapon powers. More is unnecessary when less is enough,<sup>35</sup> especially since nuclear war fighting scenarios are simply not credible. Furthermore, “The central purpose of a nation’s security policy is the defence of the life and property of its citizens. This requires a policy of restraint in which every step is taken to reduce the possibility of war. If, despite everything, deterrence fails, the objective should be to bring a quick end to the conflict with the lowest possible level of damage and

---

<sup>32</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Jervis, “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: MIT Press, 1990), p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981) p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> This aphorism is attributed to the late General Sundarji.

casualties on all sides. In addition to a policy of deterrence by denial and defence coupled with a restrained no-first-offensive-use doctrine, steps should be taken to develop and strengthen inhibitions against attacks on non-combatants.”<sup>36</sup> Humanitarian law excludes civilians and non-combatants from the conflict lest they become its innocent victims and these constraints apply equally to the older and newly emerged nuclear weapon states. India and Pakistan are no exceptions.

## A NARRATIVE OF PAST INDO-PAK “NUCLEAR” CRISES

These propositions would be illustrated with five examples of crises in Indo-Pak relations that have occurred over the last two decades: the multiple crises in 1984-85 relating to India’s purported plans to attack Pakistan’s nuclear installations; the Brasstacks crisis (1986-87); the Kashmir-related Spring crisis (1989-90), the Kargil conflict (1999) and the extended Indo-Pak border confrontation (2001-02). Before examining them, it would be useful to set out how, in theory, war fighting could occur between nuclear adversaries. The Harvard Nuclear Study Group<sup>37</sup> pointed out that nuclear war could occur through choice, miscalculation or accident, initiation by a political leader, military commander or terrorist group, by surprise or as the culmination of a protracted conflict. More specifically, five possible scenarios were sketched out in the American-Soviet context that are listed below in two categories: intended and unintended conflict.

Among the intended conflicts were the following:

- (1) surprise attack by one superpower on all or part of the nuclear forces of the other;
- (2) preemptive attacks launched in desperation during a crisis because one side believes (rightly or wrongly) that the other intends to strike first; and
- (3) escalation of conventional wars to nuclear ones.

Among the unintended conflicts were included:

- (4) accidental uses of nuclear weapons resulting from malfunctions of machines or of minds; and
- (5) nuclear wars initiated by other nuclear-armed nations or terrorist organizations.

These scenarios could be extended to the Indo-Pak nuclear standoff. Additional scenarios for both intended and unintended conflicts could also be developed like an attack on India by the United States—the *Enterprise* incident of December 1971 remains embedded in the Indian mind—or on Pakistan to take out its nuclear installations. Further, the possibility of a Chinese nuclear attack on Indian forces has been visualized if an Indian counter-offensive was launched into Chinese territory during a major Sino-Indian border conflict.<sup>38</sup> Although several further scenarios could be conjured up, the two most probable for nuclear conflict to erupt in South Asia are (1) nuclear facilities or forces being attacked or (2)

---

<sup>36</sup> Roger D. Speed, *Strategic Deterrence in the 1980s* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> The Harvard Nuclear Study Group, *Living with Nuclear Weapons*, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> General K. Sundarji, *Blind Men of Hindoostan: Indo-Pak Nuclear War* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers & Distributors, 1993), p. 149.

escalation of a conventional conflict across the nuclear threshold. Two rules of prudence are thereby highlighted: first, the need to firmly maintain the firebreak between conventional and nuclear conflict; and, second, that averting conventional conflict is the most certain way of averting nuclear war. It is perfectly imaginable that the proxy war and cross-border terrorism proceeding in Kashmir could escalate into a conventional war and further into a nuclear conflict.

On a balance of considerations the greatest plausibility of an Indo-Pak conflict becoming nuclear arises from scenario 3 working itself out, with a lower probability being accorded to scenario 4. Besides, a deliberate attack upon each other's nuclear facilities or installations or the imminent loss of a high value asset during a conventional conflict could trigger a major conflict that could acquire nuclear overtones. A lower probability must be accorded to a preemptive strike, despite the respectability acquired by this modality after the U.S. strikes against Afghanistan and Iraq. The fact that India and Pakistan have capabilities that Afghanistan and Iraq did not possess makes all the difference to their considering this option. The extreme circumspection shown by the U.S. in refraining from conducting a preemptive strike against North Korea provides an instructive lesson in this regard.

The five Indo-Pak crises mentioned above can be examined now through the perspective of escalation control.

## The 1984-85 Crises

Three separate incidents occurred during these years underlining the fragility and crisis-proneness of Indo-Pak relations. First, General Zia-ul-Huq informed the *Wall Street Journal* that India might emulate Israel's attack upon Iraq's Osiraq reactors to destroy Pakistan's nuclear program. Indira Gandhi promptly denied this allegation.<sup>39</sup> Second, Senator Moynihan alleged before the Senate Intelligence Committee that India was likely to attack Pakistan's nuclear installations. This was based on a *New York Times* report expressing concern over the inability of American satellites to locate two of India's Jaguar squadrons that could have been used for mounting low-level attacks.<sup>40</sup> Deane Hinton, American Ambassador to Pakistan, and U.S. Undersecretary of State, James Buckley, then asserted that the United States would be "responsive" if India attacked Pakistan's nuclear program, which greatly exacerbated this delicate situation. India then sought countervailing commitments from the Soviet Union, which criticized the American and Pakistani actions as being a threat to India and the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> Third, Zain Noorani, Pakistan's Defense Minister said that an Indian attack on Kahuta would amount to war; this statement was made because unconfirmed media reports had appeared that Indian planes were conducting "toss-bombing" exercises, and had even flown over the Kahuta facility.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> In truth, Indira Gandhi's statement to the *Wall Street Journal* (July 5, 1984) was enigmatic. When asked if India would attack Pakistan's nuclear installations or facilities she pondered over the question, and said, "I don't know. We've never thought of it really." *India Today* (July 29, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> *The Statesman* (New Delhi) (September 29, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review* (September 8, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> *Foreign Broadcasting Information Services (FBIS) Report* (October 17, 1985).

Despite nuclear installations and facilities being involved these incidents cannot be classified as nuclear crises. India was aware that launching a preemptive attack on Pakistan's nuclear assets was unwise for several operational reasons. For one, it could have led to a dispersal of radioactive materials that would have affected India as seriously as Pakistan. Moreover, there was no guarantee that all the relevant nuclear installations could have been destroyed by air strikes. Pakistan was reputed to have secret facilities—suspected at that time in Sihala—whose destruction could not have been ensured. Further, there was full awareness that Indian nuclear installations and facilities situated across the border or along the coast were equally vulnerable to Pakistani air attacks, with no certainty available that they could be assuredly protected. A state of conventional deterrence was thus obtaining.

In December 1985, the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, reached an understanding with President Zia of Pakistan not to attack each other's nuclear installations and facilities, which greatly allayed the tensions and instabilities caused by anxieties of an imminent strike against nuclear assets. A formal agreement was signed at the end of 1988; it was ratified in end 1991, but only implemented in late 1992 following an exchange of the lists of nuclear installations and facilities. Rajiv Gandhi's initiative "apparently stemmed from Indian wishes to end frequent speculation that India planned to attack Kahuta."<sup>43</sup> It is arguable that this declaratory non-attack measure may not be useful during conflict, but the agreement is still holding up, and constitutes an important CBM between the two countries. It could be extended to other high value assets like oil-drilling rigs at sea, refineries and dockyards that are equally vulnerable, but efforts by India to extend its ambit to cities and important economic assets have not succeeded to date.

The role of the United States in these crises was both helpful and unhelpful. There was constant pressure on both countries to moderate their competition and stabilize their relations, in which President Reagan played a major role. On the other hand, Senator Moynihan, Ambassador Deane Hinton, and Undersecretary of State, James Buckley, had fanned the idea that India would attack Pakistan's nuclear installations and facilities on the basis of very tenuous evidence without making any serious efforts to verify their suspicions before going public. Was American policy being orchestrated to dissuade India from contemplating a preemptive strike? This is not clear.

### **The Brasstacks Crisis (1986-87)**

This crisis arose from the Indian military exercise code-named "Brasstacks," and could have precipitated a war between India and Pakistan since it led to an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between their armed forces. A tense situation developed in which even a minor clash could have triggered a major conflict. The Brasstacks exercise—comparable to the largest military exercises held by NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War years—involved 10 divisions of the Indian army, including its two strike corps. It was held in northern Rajasthan, which is the most likely 'jump-off' area for India in any

---

<sup>43</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 276, citing interviews with former Indian officials and correspondence with Munir Ahmed Khan, former head of Pakistan's nuclear program.

future hostilities. This led Pakistan to continue deploying its troops that were holding their winter exercises, in their exercise locations. Later, these troops moved closer to the Indo-Pak border in a dangerous maneuver which threatened a salient in the Punjab and/or disrupted communications between Kashmir and the rest of India. A massive airlift and ground movement of troops was then undertaken by India to occupy their defensive positions along the border, resulting in a further escalation of tensions. A flurry of diplomatic activity ensued drawing in the United States and the Soviet Union. President Reagan is understood to have telephoned Rajiv Gandhi and President Zia, instructing leaders to “cool it.”<sup>44</sup> A telephone conversation between the two antagonists finally defused the crisis.

A nuclear threat is believed to have been issued to India during the crisis on January 28, 1987 by Pakistan’s chief nuclear scientist, Dr. A.Q. Khan during the course of an interview to a prominent Indian journalist, Kuldip Nayar, in the presence of a well-known Pakistani journalist, Mushahid Hussain. Apparently, Khan informed the two journalists that Pakistan had enriched uranium to weapons-grade and affirmed that a nuclear device could be tested by simulation techniques. He then added, “Nobody can undo Pakistan or take us for granted. We are here to stay and let it be clear that we shall use the bomb if our existence is threatened.”<sup>45</sup> This course of events is extremely unusual, but its veracity remains shrouded in mystery, since Khan later denied its contents. Doubts in this regard have been strengthened since “much of the interview, though not its most provocative passages, was an unattributed, nearly verbatim repetition of an article Khan had written six months earlier in the Karachi English newspaper, *Dawn*.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the crisis had peaked on January 26 when Pakistan agreed to send an official delegation to New Delhi for negotiating the withdrawal of troops from the border.<sup>47</sup>

Large exercises in India and Pakistan, including those held in sensitive areas, need not precipitate a crisis, but this occurred as no details of the exercise had been provided by India; neither was there a modicum of trust obtaining between the two countries. The danger that this exercise could have transformed into a military operation was heightened by its original setting having an East-West orientation,<sup>48</sup> which Pakistan found highly disquieting. There is a sensational account that the then Army Chief, General Sundarji, “had a secret plan to use Brasstacks to provoke Pakistan into war. It was to begin with a feigned attack at Kapalu in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). But the real plan was to attack Pakistan’s Punjab and cut off its access to Sindh. The objective was to pulverise Pakistan before its nuclear capability matured and made it nearly impossible for India to wage a massive conventional battle without risking an atomic war.”<sup>49</sup> This account by a journalist, based on interviews with many persons

---

<sup>44</sup> Kanti P. Bajpai et al. *Brasstacks and Beyond*, p. 42. A summary of the Brasstacks crisis may be seen in P.R.Chari, *Indo-Pak Nuclear Standoff: The Role of the United States* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 129-30.

<sup>45</sup> *The Observer* [London] (March 1, 1987). It should be mentioned that the interview which took place on January 28, was only published on March 1 for what can be called journalistic reasons.

<sup>46</sup> Leonard S. Spector, *The Undeclared Bomb* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1988), p. 134.

<sup>47</sup> Kanti P. Bajpai, et al, *Brasstacks and Beyond*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>48</sup> P.N. Hoon, *Unmasking Secrets of Turbulence*, p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India’s Quest to be a Nuclear Power*, (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 322–23.

then in authority, holds that India wanted to convert Pakistan's window of vulnerability into a window of opportunity for itself, but is not corroborated by other sources.

Several lessons can be drawn from this episode, apart from the real danger of its moving inexorably to a *denouement*. The most important was the hazards of large-scale military exercises being held near the Indo-Pak border without some reassurance being provided to the other side. In time, an Agreement on Advance Notice of Military Exercises, Maneuvers and Troop Movements was negotiated by the two countries which established an important confidence-building measure between them.<sup>50</sup> The second lesson was that the "hotline" established by the two Military Operations Directorates did not function, because "when the possibility of war loomed large, CBMs were distrusted or misused by one or both sides: at crucial moments, India resisted giving information that might somehow be used to its disadvantage, and both sides stopped using the DGMO hotlines after December 8."<sup>51</sup> Hence a vital CBM like the hotline worked satisfactorily in peacetime but failed during crisis when it was truly required. Third, it is dubious if a nuclear dimension imbued this crisis, given the murkiness surrounding the A.Q. Khan incident. Finally, the helpful role of President Reagan to defuse the crisis is noteworthy.

## The 1990 Crisis

An upsurge of militant activity sponsored by Pakistan in Kashmir during the latter half of 1989, coupled with Pakistan's retaining its troops in their exercise locations after its major *Zarb-e-Momin* exercise in the winter of that year, created the 1990 crisis. India reinforced its troops in Kashmir and Punjab by three and one division, respectively, as part of its "precautionary movements." From Pakistan's perspective, these troop movements were alarming for the likely reason that "the quiet manner in which these movements were effected might have conveyed the impression to Pakistan that far larger forces had, in fact, been deployed, which would permit India to launch an offensive."<sup>52</sup> Pakistan also considered it ominous that India's armored units conducting their annual training exercises in the Mahajan ranges in Rajasthan had not returned to their cantonments. Both air forces were placed on high alert, which escalated existing tensions even further. Again, this crisis seemed to be evolving inexorably towards conflict.

The United States played a pro-active role in defusing this crisis. First, an active preventive diplomacy was practiced by the U.S. Ambassadors to New Delhi (William Clark) and Islamabad (Robert Oakley). The Indian government had, in fact, invited the American Ambassador to send his representatives to tour the cantonments and satisfy themselves that no military preparations were afoot, and that India's armor and strike forces were in their peacetime locations. These tours undertaken by the U.S. military attachés in India and Pakistan did not reveal any warlike preparations, which reassured both

---

<sup>50</sup> Text of the Agreement, signed on April 6, 1991, may be seen in Michael Krepon and Amit Sevak (eds.), *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building and Reconciliation in South Asia*, pp. 255–57.

<sup>51</sup> Kanti P. Bajpai, et al, *Brasstacks and Beyond*, p. 110.

<sup>52</sup> P.R.Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema and Stephen Philip Cohen, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The compound crisis of 1990*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 84.

countries about each other's intentions and lowered tensions.<sup>53</sup> Second, a mission headed by Robert Gates, the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was mounted after the crisis had peaked, but its influence in ameliorating the crisis is not in doubt since India and Pakistan took material steps to defuse bilateral tensions following this Mission's visit. Thereafter, India withdrew its remaining armor to their peacetime locations and offered a package of military and non-military CBMs to Pakistan, which fructified into several agreements that are still extant. The United States seems to have underestimated the seriousness of the Brasstacks crisis, but overcompensated by taking the 1990 crisis far too seriously.

The U.S. was particularly concerned, incidentally, that the crisis might acquire nuclear overtones. The American journalist Seymour Hersh later wrote that Pakistan "placed its nuclear weapons arsenal on alert" during this crisis.<sup>54</sup> Other aspects of his sensational disclosures revealed that in "early spring" General Beg authorized the technicians in Kahuta to "put together nuclear weapons"; in May, American satellites noticed "the evacuation of thousands of workers from Kahuta"; furthermore, satellite intelligence showed "signs of a truck convoy moving from the suspected nuclear-storage site in Balochistan to a nearby Air Force base"; and eventually intelligence picked up "F-16s pre-positioned and armed for delivery—on full alert, with pilots in the aircraft."<sup>55</sup> These sensational disclosures have been dismissed as gross exaggerations, if not complete fabrications, in two studies of these events,<sup>56</sup> although the possibility of a "colossal bluff" being attempted by Pakistan cannot be under-estimated. That it could deliver a plausible nuclear threat was not of concern to India at that time; its conviction was that Pakistan did not have a deliverable nuclear weapon. General Sharma, the then Army Chief demonstrated this sanguineness when specifically asked whether he had apprehended a nuclear strike by Pakistan during the crisis: "No, I don't think so. There is a lot of bluff and bluster from Pakistan. It is different to talk about something and totally different to do something... In hard military terms your capacity is not judged by the bluff and bluster, but what you have in your pocket and what you can do with it."<sup>57</sup>

From India's perspective nuclear weapons had no role to play in this crisis. Did they play a role in Pakistan? An important account informs that "the United States intercepted a message to the Pakistani Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) ordering it to assemble at least one nuclear weapon. As Paul Wolfowitz, then Undersecretary of Defense has informed, 'We knew that Pakistan assembled a nuclear weapon.'<sup>58</sup> U.S. perceptions that Pakistan had acquired nuclear capabilities, even if they are accepted without question, could have added to Pakistan's confidence, but this did not exacerbate the dimensions

---

<sup>53</sup> A fairly detailed account of the first and subsequent tours undertaken by these attaches may be seen in "Conflict Prevention and Risk Reduction: Lessons from the 1990 Crisis," in Krepon and Gagné (eds.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia*, pp. 201–203.

<sup>54</sup> Seymour H. Hersh, "On the Nuclear Edge," *The New Yorker* (March 29, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5.

<sup>56</sup> P.R. Chari, et al, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia*, pp. 126–33; and "Conflict Prevention and Risk Reduction: Lessons from the 1990 Crisis," in Krepon and Gagné (eds.), *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia*.

<sup>57</sup> Interview given by Gen. V.N. Sharma to *The Economic Times* (May 18, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 308–9.

of the crisis, since India was unaware of these developments. India believed that even if Pakistan had a rudimentary nuclear device, this did not constitute a deliverable nuclear weapon capability.

In truth, there were several other reasons to explain the acceleration of this crisis to critical limits. First, the 1990 crisis was multi-faceted, since it coincided with a crisis in the internal security situation in Kashmir, and a weakening of governance in New Delhi with the coming into power of the fractious minority Janata government. Laying emphasis only on its military and purported nuclear aspects conveys an incorrect picture of its total dimensions. Second, the perceptions and misperceptions of the protagonists mirror-imaged each other. Thus “defensive and precautionary” measures by one side were seen as “offensive and warlike” preparations by the other, which aggravated obtaining tensions in the absence of meaningful communications between the two sides. Third, incendiary rhetoric by the two leaderships, largely populist posturing for domestic advantage, also inflamed the situation. During the crisis Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto talked of a “thousand-year war”<sup>59</sup> in Kashmir, and Prime Minister Singh warned Pakistan that “there should be no confusion. Such a misadventure will not be without cost.”<sup>60</sup> These declamations greatly worsened the situation. Finally, the role of the United States in defusing this crisis bears reiteration.

### **The Kargil Conflict (May-July 1999)**

The undisputed facts underlying this conflict are that Islamic militants, along with Pakistan’s regular forces, intruded across the Line of Control (LoC) and occupied the Indian Army’s defensive positions in the mountainous Kargil-Drass sector. Why these intrusions remained undetected by India bespeaks a comprehensive intelligence failure; thereafter, evicting the intruders proved a slow and difficult task, requiring close combat operations in difficult mountainous terrain to recover the posts occupied by the intruders. The Indian Air Force was used to support the Army operations. Pakistan’s motives in infracting the LoC remain obtuse. Was it designed to “unfreeze” the Line of Control? Or to gain possession of Siachen by interdicting the vulnerable Srinagar-Leh line of communications? Or to obtain support of the international community for the Pakistani claim over Kashmir? Or was it an expression of the Pakistan Army’s independence from civilian authority, assuming that the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, was only vaguely aware of its plans? In any event, Pakistan could not secure any international support; instead, its provocative cross-LoC intrusions were severely condemned by the international community as an unprovoked, unjustified act of aggression, which had the dangerous potential of spinning out of control.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, lack of support from China and American pressure, coupled with the military situation turning in India’s favor, forced Pakistan to withdraw its ill-considered

---

<sup>59</sup> Raja Asghar, “Bhutto Predicts Victory for Kashmir Independence Campaign,” *Reuters Library Report* (March 13, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> Moses Manoharan, “Indian Leader tells Pakistan to stay out of Kashmir Uprising,” *Reuters Library Report* (March 13, 1990).

<sup>61</sup> The G-8 countries, for instance, issued a communiqué criticising “the infiltration of armed intruders which violated the line of control. We regard any military action to change the status as irresponsible.” Text of communiqué may be seen in *The Hindu* (June 21, 1999).

intrusions. This was formalized in the Clinton-Sharif joint statement which noted that the Kargil fighting “is dangerous and contains the seeds of a wider conflict”, hence, “it was vital for the peace of South Asia that the Line of Control in Kashmir be respected by both parties”, and that “concrete steps be taken for the restoration of the Line of Control in accordance with the Simla Agreement”.<sup>62</sup>

There are several facets of this crisis that embody a nuclear dimension. Two are of particular significance. First, at the height of the crisis, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary had warned, “We will not hesitate to use any weapon in our arsenal to defend our territorial integrity.”<sup>63</sup> This statement cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric, taking into account its timing and its transparent intention to intimidate India. In fairness, it should also be mentioned that Home Minister, L.K. Advani, had called on Islamabad, immediately after the nuclear tests, “to realize the [consequent] change in the geostrategic situation in the region and the world.” This had “brought about a qualitatively new stage in Indo-Pak relations, particularly in finding a lasting solution to the Kashmir problem.” Now the option of “hot pursuit” was also available.<sup>64</sup> Such reckless statements were largely intended to impress domestic audiences, but had the unintended effect of escalating the ongoing crisis.

Second, the Kargil conflict revealed not only the deterrent effect of the reciprocal Indo-Pak nuclear tests, but also the workings of the stability-instability paradox.<sup>65</sup> This paradox enunciates that, “the ‘stability’ induced in bilateral adversarial relations by constructing a nuclear deterrent relationship could be offset by the ‘instability’ resulting from the feasibility of a conventional war becoming greater.”<sup>66</sup> A conscious effort was therefore made to threaten but not cross the conventional-nuclear divide, which emphasized that a measure of escalation control was obtaining. The operation of the stability-instability paradox can be surmised from the intrusions across the LoC being made by Pakistan in the expectation that India would not enlarge the spatial dimensions of the conventional conflict or cross the nuclear threshold. This explains why India did not enlarge its theater of hostilities beyond the Kargil-Drass sector. This defied military logic, which required that pressure on the defending Indian forces in the confined Kargil-Drass salient be relieved by extending the conflict to other sectors along the LoC. For that matter, it defied military logic not to attack Pakistani forces, staging posts and lines of communications across the LoC. India used its Air Force to support its ground forces, but they had strict orders not to attack targets across the LoC in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. In mountainous terrain, these prohibitions required great flying risks being taken to avoid entering Pakistani territory. Thus, the availability of nuclear weapons facilitated the initiation of both sub-conventional and conventional conflict under the rubric of nuclear deterrence.

---

<sup>62</sup> Text of the Clinton-Sharif statement of July 4, 1999 may be seen in *The Hindu* (July 6, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Editorial in *The Times of India* (June 2, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> “Roll back proxy war, Pakistan told,” *The Hindu* (May 19, 1998).

<sup>65</sup> This thesis holds that “lowering the probability that a conventional war will escalate to a nuclear war—along preemptive and other lines—reduces the danger of starting a conventional war; thus, this low likelihood of escalation—referred to here as ‘stability’—makes conventional war less dangerous, and possibly, as a result, more likely.” Charles L. Glaser, *Analysing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 46, fn 69.

<sup>66</sup> P.R. Chari, “Nuclear Restraint, Risk Reduction, and the Security-Insecurity Paradox in South Asia,” in Krepon and Gagné, *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia*, p. 33.

Was India's restraint designed to exhibit sobriety for ensuring international understanding and support? Was India inhibited by fears of escalating the conflict to trigger a general conventional war that could spiral further with unpredictable consequences? Both motives were obtaining. Pakistan, for its part, did not extend its ground operations to other sectors along the LoC to draw off Indian ground forces concentrating in the Kargil-Drass area. Neither did it use its Air Force. Was Pakistan worried that crossing the LoC with regular ground or air forces would escalate the conventional conflict? Was Pakistan inhibited by the nuclear deterrent available to India? Was restraint being met with restraint? It is difficult to be certain about Pakistan's calculations. But the practical effect of its inhibitions was the abandonment of the intruders, mostly Pakistani regular forces, on the Indian side of the LoC. Despite the Pakistan military's clever efforts to blame Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for its humiliating defeat, this has not deceived anyone.

The evidence is thus strong that the Kargil conflict revealed the definite operations of nuclear deterrence to delimit, if not deter, Indo-Pak conflict for the first time. It also revealed the workings of the stability-instability paradox in South Asia, which has made subterranean and non-conventional conflict a preferred form of engagement. Surely these are unintended consequences of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in 1998.

### **The Indo-Pak Border Confrontation (2001-02)**

This year-long crisis was precipitated by a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 with the possible intention of holding captive or killing Parliamentarians in the premises. This serious incident and the response of the Indian Government in deploying its troops along the Indo-Pak border closely parallel the Bush Administration's actions after 9/11. In both cases, the two leaderships needed to be perceived as having taken decisive action, since the terrorist attacks had great symbolic significance. The response of the United States was to launch a war against terrorism and, as a consequence, against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, while the Indian government dispatched large bodies of its armed forces to the Indo-Pakistani border. Ostensibly, the U.S. action was designed to destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda organizations and capture Osama bin Laden "dead or alive." Ostensibly, the Indian troop deployment was meant to stop cross-border infiltration by terrorists from Pakistan while ignoring the reality that the root causes of terrorism in Kashmir lay in internal political dissatisfactions.

An estimated 800,000 troops, including its two strike corps, were deployed on India's western borders, its Air Force units and satellite airfields were activated, and the Eastern (Bay of Bengal) fleet moved into the northern Arabian Sea to join the Western fleet for blockading Pakistan, if required. Several reasons were motivating the Indian action, including the use of coercive diplomacy to dissuade Pakistan from continuing its support to cross-border terrorism, and persuading the United States to restrain Pakistan. Predictably, Pakistan undertook large-scale counter-deployments of its troops leading to an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation along the border, which carried the danger of conflict being ignited, not by design, but by misperception, accident, or miscalculation. Loud thinking on the Indian side on how a limited conventional war might be fought despite the state of nuclear deterrence obtaining heightened

these dangers.<sup>67</sup> Several alternative war scenarios were speculated upon. They included an attack across the Cholistan desert to splice Pakistan into two and excising Sind away, placing Lahore under siege to obtain the surrender of Pakistan Occupied (Azad) Kashmir, cross-border raids by helicopter-borne special forces to destroy terrorist camps, punitive attacks upon Pakistan's regular forces, and letting Pakistan suffer a financial crunch due to its counter-deployment.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the present Chief of the Army Staff, General Vij, is on record<sup>69</sup> stating that a major commando operation in January 2002 "to hit and seal off major terrorist launching pads in Pakistan occupied Kashmir" was called off at the last moment.

The circumspection, however, displayed by the Indian leadership at this time deserves attention. Two major incidents had occurred that could have rapidly escalated. The first was the attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, which was an evocative symbol of Indian democracy no less than the twin towers of the World Trade Center or the Pentagon. But the government did not rush into impetuous action. This could also have occurred when the killings of the families of Army personnel in Kaluchak by terrorists on May 14, 2002 took place and greatly incensed the armed forces. Again, the Indian government did not precipitate matters, which indicates that India has raised the nuclear threshold to a very high level. What might have been Pakistan's reactions if these incidents had occurred in its territory? Would it have been similarly inhibited? If this is true, then it could be urged that nuclear deterrence in South Asia is quite robust.

The irrelevance, however, of India's massive troop deployment soon became apparent. Normalcy quickly returned to the border states—elections to the Punjab state legislature were held without incident—leading to bewilderment in the troops about why they had been deployed *en masse* along the Indo-Pak border. If the intention was to threaten an armed conflict this objective became dimmer with the passage of time. As empirically observed, "Escalation generally becomes less and less likely the longer [a] confrontation lasts. As the crisis continues each state becomes increasingly confident that it is facing a resolute adversary."<sup>70</sup> India then came under international pressure to initiate a dialogue with Pakistan and defuse this perilous situation, but it was unwilling to withdraw its troops until cross-border terrorism ceased and some twenty wanted criminals were extradited. India's refusal to enter a bilateral dialogue with Pakistan, whilst exacerbating tensions yet shunning external mediation, was illogical. Moreover, an exercise code-named Brahmastra, held by the Indian Army in the summer of 2000 "threw up no definitive answers of how Pakistan would respond to a threat to its existence as a country...the senior Army brass seemed to cling to the facile assumption that Pakistan simply would not go nuclear because of the threat of a superior Indian retaliation."<sup>71</sup> Once again, the dilemma of how a conventional conflict could be limited without its escalating to general war and kept below the nuclear level was highlighted.

---

<sup>67</sup> See Footnote 10.

<sup>68</sup> Praveen Swami, "War and Games," *Frontline* (February 15, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Jawed Naqvi, "India had planned offensive," *Dawn* (December 24, 2002), quoting a Press Trust of India report.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Powell, *Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Search for Credibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 180.

<sup>71</sup> Praveen Swami, "War and Games," p. 7.

In October 2002, India decided to withdraw its troops from the border without accomplishing the stoppage of cross-border terrorism or getting its wanted criminals extradited. The issue of a travel advisory by the U.S. government, followed by several Western countries, may have influenced the Indian decision. This had severely affected the travel and tourism industry, adding to the direct and indirect costs of the border confrontation, and moreover conveyed the threat of further economic sanctions being imposed if the prevailing tensions were not eased. However, the Government claimed that it had achieved its goals, since President Musharraf was forced to acknowledge that Pakistan was supporting cross-border terrorism and promise to stop it by restraining the fundamentalist Islamic organizations within Pakistan. That he has been either unable or unwilling to do so is another matter. This episode has serious implications for a future large-scale mobilization of troops. There is much resentment in the armed forces on being used for an ineffectual exercise. Whether they would display the same commitment in a future emergency is difficult to foretell. Whether this border confrontation crisis would make for greater ease in escalation control by the political leadership or vice versa is a matter of conjecture. But it is evident that mobilisation, *per se*, adds significantly to the risks of war by placing a premium on advertent or inadvertent escalation. A major risk arises from the two forces coming into likely direct contact with the nuclear forces of the adversary leading to “heightened preparations for nuclear operations, including the loosening of central civilian control over nuclear weapons and the dissemination of launch authority to military commanders. Among small nuclear powers this could be particularly dangerous, since their early warning and command and control apparatuses are likely to be less redundant and resilient.”<sup>72</sup>

Two conclusions of relevance to the generic issues of escalation control and deterrence can be derived from this episode: First, the Indo-Pak deterrent relationship that crystallized during the Kargil conflict has strengthened further. Despite grave provocations like the October 1, 2001 and December 13, 2001 attacks on the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly and the Indian Parliament, respectively, brutal murder of members of Army personnel families in Kaluchak, and subsequent attacks on the Raghunath and Akshardham temples in Jammu and Ahmedabad, hostilities were not opened by India, indicating that its “red lines” are fairly well recessed. It can be surmised that the impermissible acts to trigger a nuclear response would only be contemplated by India as a very last resort. Second, this comforting thesis is offset by the two leaderships indulging in high rhetoric and hurling nuclear threats against each other which exacerbates tensions and instabilities and causes concern to the world community. President Musharraf disclosed on December 30, 2002 after the border crisis ended that he would have unleashed an “unconventional war” on India had a single Indian soldier crossed the border. In response, George Fernandes assured him that “there will be no Pakistan left” if India used its nuclear weapons, Pakistan followed by warning India of “an unforgettable reply” besides accusing it of “sick war hysteria.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, Indian and Pakistani leaders have no understanding of the horrendous destruction atomic weapons are capable of; whilst being aware of their political utility, they seem to be ignorant of their military consequences. Providing these leaders with a tutorial on the effects of nuclear weapons

---

<sup>72</sup> Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Praful Bidwai, “Nuclear South Asia: Still on the edge,” *Frontline* (January 31, 2003), p. 118.

could induce greater sobriety and moderation. What needs to be reinforced in their understanding is that nuclear war-fighting is absurd, and that the only rational purpose served by nuclear weapons is to deter general and nuclear conflicts.

## TOWARDS CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing informs that crises are endemic to Indo-Pakistani relations. Five cases were reviewed that occurred during the last two decades. The first three crises were non-nuclear, but the Kargil and Indo-Pak border confrontation following the reciprocal nuclear tests in May 1998 had discrete nuclear overtones. There are unconfirmed reports of missiles, presumably with nuclear warheads, being re-deployed and operationally readied during the latter two crises. Did they escalate these crises further? Or succeed in ensuring restraint? In the absence of fuller information it is difficult to be certain in this regard. How these crises escalated but deterrence failure was averted has been discussed; the pattern of crisis development and escalation control was uniform pattern in all these cases. Fortunately, they did not proceed to conflict except in the Kargil case, but that crisis, too, was contained before it could escalate to general war. This pattern of recurrent crisis but successful escalation control might well be a South Asian contribution to strategic theory.

These crises also revealed seven commonalities. First, India and Pakistan, like the Bourbons, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing from these crises, whilst revealing a high capacity for risk-taking. There has been no increase in stability or attenuation of tensions after their reciprocal nuclear tests, which might have emplaced a more secure deterrent in South Asia. Several reasons might explain why greater stability has not accrued. South Asian leaders have yet to appreciate that nuclear weapons introduce an entirely new dimension into their adversarial relationship. Besides, as noticed earlier, nuclear relationships are most fragile in their early years as occurred with the United States and the Soviet Union. Nuclear weapons, in theory, can only deter nuclear weapons and large-scale conventional wars. But, South Asian conflict has decisively entered subterranean channels like proxy wars, clandestine operations, cross-border terrorism and so on, illustrating the operations of the “stability-instability paradox” in a special geo-political setting. Subterranean conflicts now flourish in South Asia, raising problems for escalation control.

Second, the manner in which Indo-Pak crises suddenly arise and escalate highlights the paucity of institutional mechanisms to contain them. The absence of meaningful dialogue or a process of continuing negotiations to engage each other is disconcerting because the lack of trust does not permit a reduction of tensions or the establishment of stability at lower force levels despite their having achieved nuclear status. To suggest that a dialogue is futile unless there is some prior assurance of success misses the point that, as Churchill said, it is better to jaw-jaw than war-war. The danger inherent in the lack of mutual engagement is enlarged by their unwillingness to adopt timely steps to defuse deteriorating situations. Incendiary statements and manipulation of the media to promote the domestic agenda adds to the contours of the crisis; this adds to the ease of crisis development/acceleration, while increasing the problems of escalation control.

Third, rhetoric has supplanted normal discourse in the absence of dialogue between the two leaderships. They have simultaneously reduced their diplomatic representation by routinely expelling each other's diplomats and reducing the strength of their chanceries.<sup>74</sup> High rhetoric need not, of course, presage instability in an adversarial relationship. But, the practical result of such inflammatory statements, especially during Indo-Pak crises, is to vitiate the obtaining tense atmosphere, kindle public sentiments, and make the normalizing of relations more difficult. Sub-continental leaders find it hard to retract from their rhetorical stances, precipitating a drift towards conflict which they do not want. The rule of prudence informs that such rhetoric which aggravates a difficult condition needs to be avoided.

Fourth, the beguiling myth that launching a preemptive attack to destroy or seriously degrade the adversary's nuclear assets has finally been laid to rest. It is arguable that the limited numbers of nuclear weapons available to India, short flight times to targets in South Asia, absence of early warning systems, lack of missile defenses and so on make pre-emption an attractive option. Precisely for these reasons, however, a preemptive strike should be ruled out on the rational considerations that dispersed nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles cannot be attacked and destroyed with assured certainty. In the South Asian situation the availability of even a few nuclear weapons for retaliatory purposes could wreak havoc if used in a counter-city mode. This suggests caution and refraining from the dangerous gamble embedded in conducting a preemptive attack. A first strike could still be triggered by accident or leadership irrationality, but this is different from deliberating contemplating a preemptive attack.

Fifth, Indo-Pak nuclear crises display a classical "game of chicken" in that escalation proceeds uncontrollably towards catastrophe with the contending parties under stress to either "chicken out" or court disaster. A third option of relevance to South Asia is avoidance of decision which is possible due to external intervention. Avoiding loss of face is very important for South Asian leaderships, hence their fervent hope of extrication from their predicament in this "game of chicken" by outside authority. A review of the five cases discussed above reveals that external intervention ensured that face would not be lost by either country through constructing a make-believe win-win situation. The two leaderships could then present the crisis de-escalation as a victory for itself, with a cooperative media projecting this self-image.

Sixth, the question of fighting limited wars against the nuclear backdrop received much attention in India during this crisis, which reflects the frustration of its military and political establishment at its inability to translate nuclear capability into strategic advantage. Ironically, the reciprocal nuclear tests conducted in May 1998 have reduced the space available to India for translating its superiority in conventional arms into political advantage. Pakistan now exercises a "unit veto" over its use of force, and India's leadership must reconcile itself to this bitter truth. Their strenuous efforts to advance theories like the feasibility of waging limited war must be evaluated against this backdrop of growing helplessness. Further, the circle has yet to be squared that fighting a limited war is worthless if its objectives are too

---

<sup>74</sup> Counselor-level officials head the two High Commissions in Islamabad and New Delhi after the two Ambassadors left their posts at various times last year (2002). These incumbents, too, were declared *persona non grata* and withdrawn. Now their replacements are manning these posts. The simultaneous down-gradation of diplomatic representation at a time when relations are extremely bad conveys the casualness with which the issue of normalization of relations is being approached for purely domestic and internal political advantage.

modest but, if they are too ambitious, a general conventional and nuclear conflict could be triggered. This dilemma was conceded by a senior Indian official admitting that, “Surgical strikes are the realistic option [in a limited Indo-Pak conflict]. But we also know that there will be retaliation on other parts of the border from Pakistan. It’ll escalate and will not be confined to one region.”<sup>75</sup> From the perspective of escalation control, moreover, “There will be pressure on the losing side to expand the war in order to reverse the battlefield decision and pressure on the winning side to expand its war termination conditions and hence military operations.”<sup>76</sup> Fortunately, these scenarios did not develop during the Kargil conflict.

Seventh, the role of the United States in defusing these crises was critical to dampen them. This might be inspiring beliefs in the Indo-Pak leadership that they can provoke and escalate these crises to gain political advantage, since the United States and the international community would draw them back from the precipice if matters got out of control. Would these crises have proceeded very far if the United States had informed both parties that it would not mediate in their quarrels? This is an arguable proposition but, in my view, a “hands off” declaration by the United States could induce both countries to make more serious efforts to avoid a crisis and to establish mechanisms for escalation control. This belief is founded on the premise that elements in their ruling elites have a vested interest in creating tensions and instabilities to serve partisan ends. They have no interest, however, in these crises proceeding to conflict for several political and financial reasons. The United States admirably fulfils this role of defusing escalating crises and not permitting their drift towards conflict in appreciation of its self-anointed role as the world’s sole superpower charged with establishing order throughout the international system. The historical record informs that the United States was successful in defusing these Indo-Pak crises short of conflict; even in the Kargil case its role was crucial to stop the conflict. In a fashion, therefore, both the American and South Asian leaderships are serving each other’s purposes. But the American role has been critical in achieving escalation control during Indo-Pak crises, which is likely to continue now that its armed forces are physically present in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Quite evidently, the Indian leadership has elected to satisfy all the constituencies involved: political parties, bureaucracies (civil, military, scientific), and the electorate. They have also sought to manipulate these crises to gain electoral advantage, whilst not having any serious desire to launch a conflict in appreciation of its economic costs, the uncertain prospects of success and the political penalties of failure. How have they precipitated crises but maintained escalation control? This is equally true of the Pakistani leadership. Does this capacity of the Indo-Pak leadership to precipitate crisis, graduate their progression and retract from the brink make for optimism regarding escalation control? Will this continue in future? Could another Kargil-type operation or border confrontation develop and proceed on predictable lines? These are unanswerable questions since the future need not replicate the past. The problem with unrelieved optimism however is that the possibility of miscalculation or misperception or accident triggering conflict is always there. As Scott Sagan notices, “Nuclear weapons may well have made *deliberate* war less likely, but, the complex and tightly coupled nuclear arsenal we have constructed

---

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Narain, *Outlook*, June 10, 2002.

<sup>76</sup> Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, p. 32

has simultaneously made an *accidental* war more likely.”<sup>77</sup> Further, South Asian leaders could display the same irrationality in national security decision-making as has been chronicled in the case of leaders of other nuclear weapon states.

The possibility, therefore, of future crises occurring will continue despite the recent efforts of Prime Minister Vajpayee to stretch his “hand of friendship” to Pakistan, declaring various steps to revive bilateral relations with Pakistan. Elections to several major states and the general elections in India are scheduled for late 2003 and early 2004. The ruling BJP party believes that using Pakistan as the external and Muslims in India as the internal scapegoat for its failures could be translated into votes. The Opposition parties are reacting mildly to this policy on similar electoral considerations; hence Vajpayee will need to perform a balancing act. The same is also true of President Musharraf, who faces the difficult task of restraining the jihadi elements created by the military, but retaining their support to keep the liberal and democratic parties out of power. What all this portends is that steps to normalize Indo-Pak relations will proceed at a snail’s pace. A curious identity of interests obtains between fundamentalists on both sides of the border to exacerbate Indo-Pak relations and maintain their centrality in the polity. Vested interests in promoting strained relations that disfigure the Indo-Pak relationship remain strong, presaging crises in the future, difficulties in escalation control, and latent dangers of enlarged conflict and deterrence failure. This corresponds to the state of “ugly stability” in South Asia recognized by Ashley Tellis, which may occasionally be punctuated by “uglier stability.” Kargil-type situations could occur in the future but, with luck, each such episodic “crisis slide” would gradually recede to the previous condition of “ugly stability.”<sup>78</sup> One can broadly agree with this prognostication but qualify it by suggesting that each such episode would add to the learning curve of South Asian leadership and, hopefully, educate them in the problems of escalation control in a nuclear environment. They would need to appreciate that frequent brandishing of nuclear weapons in the absence of mechanisms to ensure escalation control could herald a “crisis slide” towards congenital instability.

The question now becomes germane: how can India and Pakistan avoid these recurrent crises in their relationship, achieve escalation control, and ensure that nuclear deterrence remains robust? They might have weaponized their nuclear arsenals, but overt deployment has not yet taken place. By not deploying their nuclear arsenals, the space is available to ensure that accidents do not occur and that the need for adopting a launch-on warning or launch-under-attack nuclear posture with their dilemmas is not encountered. Non-deployment also provides the space for establishing a “decoupled” nuclear stockpile in which the warheads are kept separate from delivery systems and, further, nuclear cores are kept separate from the conventional explosive trigger in the interests of safety and lowering of tensions and instabilities. It bears reiteration that the two countries should also avoid the provocations that have fuelled past crises by abjuring incendiary statements and embarking on actions that could exacerbate tensions and instabilities.

---

<sup>77</sup> Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 264.

<sup>78</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, *India’s Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2001), pp. 131–2.

These prudential steps are important, since recent political events in Pakistan have considerably altered its domestic situation. The elections held in 2002 have brought fundamentalist Islamic parties into power in Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province with a powerful presence in national politics. This has coincided with the establishment of large American bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Central Asia. The United States has thus become a regional power and will continue to play a mediatory role to avert Indo-Pak crises. Its presence will also be a major factor inhibiting future Indo-Pak conflict. The United States is seeking a resumption of the Indo-Pak bilateral dialogue and a pro-active Indian policy to address the Kashmir problem. These efforts have yielded some modest results with both countries inching towards re-establishing their bilateral dialogue.

Assuming that such crises are part of the rites and rituals of Indo-Pak relations and that periodical exercises in brinkmanship will not lead to nuclear conflict due to the maturity of the two leaderships is naïve. No doubt personalities are important in the absence of institutional mechanisms to handle their recurring crises. An urgent need therefore obtains for communications being maintained by the two leaderships at all times. An urgent need also exists for negotiating and emplacing risk reduction measures to provide the formal means to avert crisis. These were envisaged in the Memorandum of Understanding accompanying the aborted Lahore Declaration. The problem here is that the parties involved in regional disputes have little reason to initiate arms control negotiations if they still expect to fight over conflicting political objectives like Kashmir. Assuming consequently that the United States and the international community will always be able to successfully defuse future Indo-Pak crises in the future is serendipitous. Only dialogue and confidence building between India and Pakistan offers a more certain modality to avert crises in South Asia, permit escalation control, and ensure that deterrence breakdown will not lead to a tragedy of epic proportions. Inescapably, the maintenance of nuclear deterrence requires symbiotically linked adversaries to find stability in a joint enterprise. The alternative is conflict escalation and deterrence failure.