

Twenty-three Years of Nonuse

Does the Nuclear Taboo Constrain India and Pakistan?

The nuclear taboo, a normative inhibition against nuclear first use, is weak in Pakistan and risks being undermined in India

By Nina Tannenwald

Does the nuclear taboo matter in South Asia? Nina Tannenwald examines the status and role of the nuclear taboo—a normative inhibition against nuclear first use—in the twenty-three-year legacy of the nonuse of nuclear weapons in South Asia. She finds that, although a discourse of the taboo exists, the taboo itself is fragile. Drawing on a comparison with the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, she analyzes whether Indian and Pakistani leaders are constrained by the taboo, as well as factors contributing to strengthening or weakening the taboo in the two countries. India, which has codified the taboo in its No First Use (NFU) policy and has traditionally pursued a policy of nuclear “restraint,” nevertheless appears to be weakening the taboo through doctrinal drift away from its NFU policy and toward a more aggressive nuclear posture. In Pakistan, the taboo is weak because of nuclear nationalism and the perception that nuclear weapons are the ultimate defense against India, among other reasons.

Tannenwald argues that it is in the interests of both countries to strengthen the nuclear taboo in South Asia. She identifies several steps India and Pakistan should take, including strong public statements from leaders about the importance of preserving the tradition of non-use and strengthening the taboo, engagement in bilateral and multilateral arms control, and public education regarding nuclear weapons.

Since India and Pakistan first overtly tested nuclear weapons in 1998, both countries have developed the ability to deliver a nuclear weapon in war. Twenty-three years have passed since both countries knew for certain that both of them could detonate a nuclear device, yet neither has employed such a weapon in wartime. Thus a 23-year pattern of nonuse of nuclear weapons has emerged between India and Pakistan.ⁱ The two adversaries have continued to engage in military conflicts since 1998, but so far, leaders on both sides have ultimately halted the conflicts before they could escalate out of control or across the nuclear threshold. Nevertheless, the confrontations have grown riskier.

India and Pakistan have fought four wars beginning with the initial war of partition in 1947, as well as additional militarized border skirmishes, the most recent in February 2019. They also maintain a near-constant state of military readiness along their border and have little formal government-to-government dialogue. A fifth war could be drastically costlier, as both countries continue to develop their nuclear and conventional arsenals. India is estimated to have a stockpile of 150-160 nuclear weapons while Pakistan is estimated to have a stockpile of 140-150 that is growing rapidly.ⁱⁱ Both countries also possess ballistic- and cruise-missile research and development programs, as well as naval nuclear force programs.

Does 23 years of nonuse of a major weapon count as a “tradition” of nonuse? Further, does this tradition carry normative “weight,” or a sense of obligation, for Indian and Pakistani leaders? That is, are they constrained by a norm of nonuse or the nuclear “taboo” — a de facto, normative prohibition on using nuclear weapons first?

In this essay, I evaluate the status of the nuclear taboo today in India and Pakistan. I begin with a brief discussion of the tradition of nuclear nonuse and the nuclear taboo. I then consider whether India and Pakistan are constrained by the taboo, whether it influences the behavior of leaders, and factors that contribute to strengthening or undermining it. Today, unfortunately, the behavior and nuclear policies of these two countries are not propitious for maintaining the taboo. India’s current nuclear policies risk undermining the taboo there, while the taboo remains weak in Pakistan. I conclude by offering some suggestions for strengthening the nuclear taboo in South Asia.

Tradition and Taboo

Since August 1945, when the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan in the closing days of World War II, no nation has employed nuclear weapons during war.ⁱⁱⁱ Many people fully expected that nuclear weapons would be used again after 1945. Yet the nuclear-armed superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, did not resort to nuclear weapons

during numerous crises during or after the Cold War. Contrary to early expectations, a 76-year tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons has arisen in global politics.

The nonuse of nuclear weapons since 1945 is the single most important feature of the nuclear age. Scholars have referred to this phenomenon in terms of both a “tradition” and a “taboo.” Some scholars argue that nonuse of nuclear weapons is best understood as a tradition of nonuse because it is best explained by prudential concerns about the long-term consequences of setting negative precedents (for use) rather than by concerns about normative acceptability. A tradition depends on the iteration of behavior over time, precedent, and reciprocity.^{iv} By definition, any violation of the tradition brings it to an end.

Others argue that the pattern of nonuse is not simply a tradition but also reflects a nuclear taboo, a normative inhibition against the first use of nuclear weapons that stems from a powerful sense of revulsion associated with such destructive weapons.^v The notion of taboo goes beyond tradition to capture the profound moral dimensions of debates over the role of nuclear weapons. In India, for example, debates about nuclear weapons and disarmament have long featured a strong moral element invoking India’s heritage of Gandhian nonviolence. Around the world, many have come to view the phenomenon of nuclear nonuse not simply as a rule of prudence but as a taboo with an explicit normative aspect and a sense of obligation attached to it. The taboo can operate instrumentally, as a norm of nonuse — for example, through concerns about the reputational or political costs of violating it. It can also operate more substantively through individual conscience or belief that such catastrophically destructive weapons are abhorrent and their use would be morally wrong. The taboo can be held (or not) by elites (including elites in the military) and by the public. In this article I use the word “tradition” to refer to the empirical pattern of nonuse and the word “taboo” to refer to the belief about the practice.

The nuclear taboo is a de facto prohibition on a first use of nuclear weapons in war. It applies to any first use of nuclear weapons, whether such weapons are so-called strategic or tactical, and whether use is the result of careful calculation or miscalculation. For example, if Pakistani military forces were overrun in a conventional war with India and resorted to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, as per Pakistan’s military plans, it would be a deliberate use of nuclear weapons that would violate the taboo on use. If Pakistani forces misperceived whether they were being overrun and launched a tactical nuclear strike unnecessarily, it would amount to starting a nuclear war through inadvertence or miscalculation — probably the most likely way deterrence would fail and the nuclear taboo would be violated. A truly “accidental” use of nuclear weapons (say, a computer glitch that broadcast a false alarm and led a launch officer to push the launch button) would also physically violate the taboo, of course, but its meaning would be different and would depend very much on the context and how states framed it after

the fact. On the other hand, leaders and militaries might not employ nuclear weapons for reasons that have nothing to do with a taboo, including deterrence, fear of escalation, lack of military utility, and lack of readiness. Sorting out the influence of a taboo from these other factors poses a challenge for analyzing the nonuse of nuclear weapons.

Several key mechanisms have fostered the rise of the global taboo since 1945: active efforts by non-nuclear states, the United Nations, and civil society to stigmatize nuclear weapons; the role of public opinion; the moral concerns of individual leaders; the emergence of “mutual assured destruction” between the United States and the Soviet Union; the iterated behavior of nonuse over time; and the acceptance of the taboo by successive national leaders. Since its rise during the Cold War, the nuclear taboo has been embraced by the United Nations (U.N.) and by leaders and publics around the world as a norm of international politics. In an important summit statement in November 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that “they support strengthening the six decade-old international norm of nonuse of nuclear weapons.”^{vi} Indian diplomacy has also consistently advocated for a global “no first use” norm, though, as discussed further below, the Indian no-first-use commitment has come under question in recent years. I have argued elsewhere that the taboo played an important role in restraining U.S. leaders from resorting to first use of nuclear weapons during and after the Cold War.^{vii} Although deterrence also played a role, without the emergence of this normative stigma since 1945, nuclear weapons might have been used again.

The rise of the taboo has had three main effects. First, the taboo has made it impossible to view nuclear weapons as “just another weapon.” This shift in discourse is the single most important legacy of the global anti-nuclear movement. Second, in at least the case of the United States and the Soviet Union, the taboo has reinforced mutual deterrence between nuclear powers, largely through arms control institutions. By embedding deterrence doctrine and practice in a set of regulative and constitutive norms, it has helped to stabilize the practice of nonuse and legitimized deterrence rather than use as the appropriate role for the bomb.^{viii} That is, U.S. and Soviet leaders assumed that nuclear weapons would only be used in the direst of situations, and thus the nuclear dyad was more stable than it would have been absent the taboo. The taboo reinforced their shared understanding that nuclear weapons would not be used early in a conflict or at low levels of tension. Whether the taboo has this effect in the India-Pakistan relationship is less clear, in part because Pakistani leaders have a history of issuing nuclear threats, and arms control in South Asia is largely nonexistent. Finally, and more speculatively, the taboo has undermined deterrence between nuclear and non-nuclear states. The threat to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state has become less credible over time. Indeed, most nuclear-armed states, though not North Korea, have made public declarations that they would not use or threaten nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

Whether the taboo operates in the “newer” nuclear states such as India and Pakistan is an important question. If one factor strengthening the taboo in a state is a long period of nonuse, then the taboo is inherently less powerful in the newer nuclear states. At the same time, doctrinal consistency, especially in the form of a declared no-first-use (NFU) policy such as India proclaims, may strengthen the taboo. The U.S.-Soviet nuclear relationship was 23 years old in 1968. By then, the United States and Russia had weathered numerous nuclear crises, most importantly the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. They had also adopted several arms-control and security-cooperation agreements, some of which established some norms and rules of crisis management.^{ix} Especially significant, by this time leaders clearly viewed the pattern of nuclear nonuse as a desirable tradition to be preserved. During the 1964 presidential campaign, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson made an explicit public statement to this effect: “For 19 peril-filled years no nation has loosed the atom against another. To do so now is a political decision of the highest order. And it would lead us down an uncertain path of blows and counterblows whose outcome none may know.”^x

India and Pakistan have had a comparable series of nuclear-tinged crises, and we might expect that 23 years of mutual nuclear threat between the two countries would foster at least a rationalist norm of nonuse. In the wake of the 2019 Pulwama Crisis, we may see the first glimmers of this discussion. Yet, on balance, the crises have failed to lead to even discussions of deterrence stability, let alone arms control or a norm of nonuse. Beyond the flashpoint of Kashmir, an important factor in the South Asia case is that India and Pakistan, while de facto nuclear-weapons states, are not members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and other institutions and agreements of the international nuclear normative order. They thus exist in a “liminal space” with “greater room for continued existence outside of international norms.”^{xi} How the norms of this order might operate for them are therefore less clear. Nevertheless, this liminal “excluded” status may create incentives for Indian and Pakistani leaders to demonstrate compliance with the norms of the international community, even if they are not legally bound, as a way to demonstrate their status as “responsible” nuclear states.

Evaluating the Nuclear Taboo in India and Pakistan: The Global Context

Any evaluation of the nuclear taboo in South Asia must consider how global forces have shaped, and continue to influence, the development of norms about nuclear nonuse in India and Pakistan. These include, over the decades, sanctions and international diplomatic pressure on India and Pakistan to reign in or dismantle their nuclear programs; the examples and

models of nuclear behavior, both good and bad, set by the existing nuclear-armed states; and the norms of the global nuclear order, such as those of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. External forces also include the explicit efforts of U.S. and other leaders to press the importance of nonuse and restraint on Indian and Pakistani leaders during repeated nuclear crises.

On balance, however, international and U.S. sanctions and pressure on India and Pakistan for their nuclear programs have been weak or short-lived, lifted in the face of competing foreign policy priorities, such as the need for Pakistan's support for U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or for a civil nuclear deal with India, and Indian membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, to leverage realignment to balance China. Ultimately, the Western alliance failed to impose any restraining legal obligations (including even the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty) on the nuclear programs of India and Pakistan, leaving them open to expansion. Today, as a result of growing geopolitical tensions and failed diplomacy, not only India and Pakistan but all the nuclear-armed states are modernizing their nuclear arsenals, and qualitative and even quantitative arms races are underway. Disarmament is barely on the table. States are re-legitimizing nuclear weapons in their security policies, and several countries, including the United States, appear to be lowering the threshold for use of nuclear weapons in their doctrines and policy. In short, as nuclear-armed states pursue nuclear excess rather than restraint, the taboo appears to be at risk everywhere.

Important sources of evidence for the nuclear taboo lie in states' nuclear policies and doctrines for the use of nuclear weapons, along with institutions and agreements that embed norms of nuclear restraint. Also important is the changing way leaders talk about nuclear weapons and public attitudes toward nuclear use. If the taboo operates (i.e., if there is a normative influence), we would expect force postures and doctrines that reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policy, eschew first strike doctrines, and maintain a sharp distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. We would also expect diplomacy, public discourse, and decision-making that avoid normalizing nuclear weapons or that raise normative or moral considerations ("taboo talk"). Decision-making would also reflect the role of socialization, identity, and rule-guided behavior rather than simply strategic interaction. Finally, since assessing the precise strength or status of a norm at any given moment is difficult, it useful to examine trends over time.

India and the Nuclear Taboo

India represents an interesting case for the nuclear taboo because of its long, slow path to nuclear weapons, its tradition of Gandhian nonviolence and Nehruvian anti-nuclearism, and its

role for many decades as a self-appointed crusader for global disarmament.^{xii} Further, India's declared policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons — a policy first adopted by China — essentially codifies the taboo in its nuclear doctrine. If the taboo exists anywhere, we should expect it to be held in India.

India first tested a nuclear weapon secretly in 1974. After shocking the world with its overt nuclear-weapons tests in May 1998, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee announced in a speech to the Indian Parliament on May 27, 1998, that India was adopting an NFU policy and pledged it would never use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. In justifying India's possession of nuclear weapons after Indian leaders had spent years castigating them as immoral, a draft Indian doctrine statement released the following year criticized the major nuclear powers' insistence on retaining first-use doctrines even against non-nuclear states, accusing them of legitimizing first use.^{xiii} Despite criticisms that India's plan to build a nuclear triad along the model of the declared nuclear states was inconsistent with its stated aims of seeking only a "minimum but credible deterrent," Indian commentators emphasized that Indian doctrine sought to "chart a new path." Unlike most other nuclear states, one declared, India's nuclear weapons were "*not* meant to deter the use and threat of conventional weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons or a generalized formulation of protecting national interests any time anywhere."^{xiv} In 2003, however, India modified its doctrine to allow the use of nuclear weapons to respond to chemical and biological attacks, thus emulating a policy that had been adopted by the United States.^{xv}

Indian leaders' recognition of the special status of nuclear weapons has been reflected in both public statements and operational policy. From 1998, Indian leaders consistently stated publicly that they viewed nuclear weapons as political weapons. "They are not military weapons," said General V. P. Malik, former chief of the Indian Army, in an interview in August 1998, a few months after the nuclear tests. He added that nuclear weapons "are political weapons and they must be viewed as such."^{xvi} Operationally, India's doctrine emphasizes that its nuclear weapons are for deterring the use of nuclear weapons by the adversary. The arsenal is structured for retaliation in response to a nuclear attack. Weapons are kept de-mated and disassembled, although their state of readiness may vary.^{xvii} India maintains firm civilian control and custody over the nuclear arsenal, and any decision to use nuclear weapons would rest with political authorities, not military leaders. There is "no conventionalization of nuclear weapons."^{xviii}

These policies grew out of internal policy debates that began well before the 1998 tests. Indian leaders were strongly aware that in order for India's new nuclear status to be accepted internationally, India would have to demonstrate responsibility and restraint.^{xix} For the first year after the nuclear tests, both India and Pakistan were also under significant U.S. economic

sanctions as well as diplomatic pressure to demonstrate nuclear restraint. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1172, adopted unanimously on June 6, 1998, condemned the nuclear tests of both countries and called on them to halt their nuclear programs. The Security Council resolution and the sanctions were aimed at the issue of nonproliferation, not specifically nonuse, but they reinforced to Indian leaders the overall need to demonstrate restraint. India and Pakistan agreed bilaterally in 1999 to respect a test moratorium. Thus, sources of Indian restraint were both internal (domestic values) and external (coercive economic pressure to enforce international nonproliferation norms).

The consensus in India policy circles, years before 1998, was that any Indian nuclear force would have an NFU doctrine to signal that India's nuclear weapons were for defensive, not aggressive, purposes.^{xx} India's intention in declaring an NFU policy was partly to help defuse tensions with Pakistan. But India has also successfully wielded its NFU policy as a diplomatic tool to signal that it is a responsible nuclear power, a notion that Indian leaders leveraged to achieve the U.S.-India nuclear deal signed in 2008. As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently put it in 2019: "India is a very responsible state. We are the only country to have a declared NFU [sic]. It's not because of world pressure, but because of our own ethos. We will not move away from this, whichever government comes to power."^{xxi} Indeed, India has gotten substantial mileage out of its NFU pledge. The pledge has proved useful for portraying Pakistan as a relatively irresponsible custodian of its nuclear arsenal. Likewise, Indian leaders use their NFU pledge as a way to resist pressures to sign any treaties that would restrict India's nuclear arsenal.^{xxii}

Normative concerns about nuclear weapons have been prominent in India. Many of India's prime ministers from the Congress Party, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai and even Manmohan Singh, were deeply ambivalent about nuclear weapons and even morally averse. Nehru called the bomb a "symbol of evil," while Indira Gandhi was troubled by India's departure from her father's morally inspired policy of rejecting nuclear weapons, and appeared to have second thoughts about the wisdom of the 1974 test which she had authorized.^{xxiii} Desai held a strong personal aversion to nuclear weapons and declared that India would neither conduct any more tests nor manufacture nuclear weapons.^{xxiv} Some civil society peace groups also criticized the move to test.^{xxv} India has a small anti-nuclear movement, symbolized especially by the prize-winning novelist and outspoken anti-nuclear activist Arundhati Roy. In recent years, Singh has spoken publicly about the value of the nuclear taboo (see more below).

1999 Kargil War — Deterrence or Taboo?

The 1999 Kargil War, the first conflict between India and Pakistan after both had become nuclear powers, provided the first test of nuclear restraint. Pakistan had secretly sent hundreds of troops across the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir to occupy mountaintop posts looking down on a key highway. When India discovered the Pakistani ploy in mid-May 1999, it launched a furious counterattack with air and ground forces. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Indian forces suffered heavy losses, Prime Minister Vajpayee prohibited the Indian forces from crossing the LoC or the international border to pursue Pakistani troops. By early July, as U.S. official Bruce Riedel later recalled, Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra told U.S. National Security Advisor Sandy Berger that India would escalate if Pakistan did not withdraw behind the LoC. If India expanded the war, U.S. officials believed, Pakistan would probably lose and might resort to its nuclear arsenal. Indeed, on July 4, the CIA wrote in its top-secret daily brief that Pakistan was preparing its nuclear weapons for deployment and possible use.^{xxvi} Pakistani leaders have subsequently denied this, saying that Pakistan did not actually possess a deliverable nuclear weapon at the time, but it is likely there was some movement of Pakistani nuclear warheads toward the border.^{xxvii} The United States put unequivocal pressure on Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had jetted to Washington to seek U.S. President Bill Clinton's assistance, to withdraw his troops back across the LoC.

Was India “deterred” from crossing the LoC or were Indian leaders constrained by the nuclear taboo? As an analytical matter, it is difficult to disentangle the role of the taboo from the role of deterrence in influencing leaders' decisions because both factors lead to the same outcome. Numerous scholars have weighed in on the Kargil War, debating whether deterrence, diplomacy, or tactical considerations dominated Indian leaders' calculations. Mario Carranza makes the strong case that “the nuclear taboo, rather than nuclear deterrence, explains the non-use of nuclear weapons” during the crisis. Indian leaders showed they were “not deterred” by Pakistan's nuclear arsenal when they privately threatened to escalate the war if Pakistani troops did not withdraw.^{xxviii}

The evidence is mixed, however, and does not support this easy dismissal of deterrence. Internal accounts make clear that Indian leaders were clearly constrained (i.e., deterred) by concerns about nuclear escalation. According to V. K. Sood and Pravin Sawney, Prime Minister Vajpayee “was known to have seriously considered [worried about] a Pakistani nuclear strike if India escalated the war” by crossing the LoC or into Pakistan.^{xxix} Scholars argue that Indian leaders refrained from expanding the conflict because of a “fear of generating uncontrolled escalation.”^{xxx} As another scholar observed, “Even though India was conventionally stronger, it could not bring to bear its power on Pakistan for fear of nuclear

escalation.”^{xxxix} Most significant, Indian leaders chose to bear heavy military losses rather than expand operations beyond the Kargil sector because of the risk of nuclear escalation. In contrast, in the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan, before the two countries possessed nuclear weapons, as Vipin Narang points out, Indian leaders had fewer inhibitions in invading Pakistan.^{xxxix} In short, Indian leaders’ actions during the conflict demonstrated a clear recognition of thresholds that could raise the risk of escalation to nuclear war.

Nevertheless, could this restraint also be due to the influence of a taboo, as Carranza argues? A taboo explanation would point to rule-following, normative concerns, and reputational and identity mechanisms. There does seem to be some evidence of this. Indian leaders had committed in advance to a policy of not using nuclear weapons first, and articulated this intent clearly to their military commanders. According to then Army Vice-Chief Lieutenant General Vijai Oberai, during the war Army Chief General V. P. Malik sent a confidential letter to his army commanders stating: “Nuclear weapons are political weapons and will not be used in war-fighting.”^{xxxix} In the words of Vijay Shankar, a former Strategic Forces commander, “The idea is to *not* use these things [nuclear weapons].”^{xxxix} Reputational and identity concerns indeed appear to have operated as a strong constraint. According to Indian officials, the Indians “avoided crossing the line of control mainly out of concern for world opinion” and to “keep the moral high ground.”^{xxxv} According to some analysts, Indian leaders’ desire to uphold an identity of a peace-seeking, “responsible” nuclear state “acts as an important brake on India’s propensity to respond aggressively to future Pakistani provocations.”^{xxxvi} These are strong statements of reputation as a constraint. The fact that India was 10 days away from escalating the crisis, however, suggests limits to both deterrence and the taboo. Some Indian leaders have argued that while they were deterred from engaging in a large-scale conventional war with Pakistan, they would not have hesitated to cross the LoC if it had been militarily necessary.^{xxxvii}

It is difficult to conclude decisively in this case whether Indian leaders had really internalized the taboo or rather whether they were mainly concerned for reputational reasons that the United States and other world powers held the taboo and would punish India. The evidence here suggests that, during Kargil, Indian leaders may not have fully internalized the taboo and were constrained especially because of reputational concerns. In the end, however, we may lack the kind of detailed evidence on internal decision-making and leaders’ beliefs to really adjudicate between the two mechanisms. For example, it is possible that some leaders genuinely held the taboo, while for others the taboo operated mostly as a matter of reputation.

After Kargil

In subsequent crises in 2001-2002 and 2008, India continued to largely maintain a tone of restraint in the face of Pakistani provocations and nuclear threats. By 2005, India had begun to

achieve its goal of being accepted into the global nuclear order as a “responsible” nuclear power, symbolized by the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement signed in 2008. However, especially after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, some Indian analysts began to argue that India’s NFU policy was inadequate to deter Pakistan’s terrorist provocations and deterrence strategy emphasizing early use of battlefield nuclear weapons, even though deterring terrorism had never been a stated objective of India’s nuclear arsenal.^{xxxviii}

Nevertheless, analysts now debate whether India is moving away from its minimum deterrence posture toward more counterforce capabilities, including precision-strike weapons and target-acquisition capabilities.^{xxxix} On one hand, India’s arsenal remains relatively small — the most important piece of evidence against the argument that India is seeking a real “first-strike” capability. Nevertheless, some evidence exists that India is loosening the definition of NFU, cultivating greater ambiguity about its nuclear policy, emphasizing higher readiness, and filling out the pieces of its nuclear triad with intercontinental missiles and nuclear-armed submarines.^{xl} Some scholars argue that this reflects a growing Indian ambition to fully operationalize its nuclear forces in a high state of readiness, thus emulating the superpowers.^{xli} These more aggressive policies push on the taboo. In addition, the Indian government’s nationalistic jingoism about its nuclear arsenal risks normalizing nuclear weapons, weakens the taboo on use, and undermines India’s supposed commitment to nuclear “responsibility” and restraint.

Thus, it came as little surprise that, despite decades of disarmament advocacy by Indian leaders, in 2013-2014 they joined the other nuclear-armed states in boycotting the U.N. campaign to highlight the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons as well as the subsequent negotiation of the 2017 Nuclear Prohibition Treaty.

Indian Public Opinion on Nuclear Use

There has long been a significant domestic debate about nuclear weapons in India, and the Indian public appears to strongly support the NFU policy in the abstract. In internet surveys conducted in 2015, 90 percent of those polled agreed that “India should not use nuclear weapons unless it is attacked first with nuclear weapons by another country.”^{xlii} This is an extremely high number suggesting strong support for the NFU policy. Nevertheless, in a poll using hypothetical scenarios, respondents were much more supportive of using nuclear weapons first, suggesting that the Indian public holds only a weak taboo. For example, when given a scenario in which a Pakistan-backed terrorist group was reportedly building a nuclear bomb in a bunker in Lahore, slightly over half of respondents (53 percent) supported a nuclear

strike over a conventional strike even though the two types of strikes were both 90 percent effective and both would leave 1,000 Pakistanis dead.^{xliii} In other scenarios, support for nuclear strikes rose even higher, even when they would result in the deaths of 50,000 Pakistani civilians.^{xliv} While preliminary, these disturbing findings suggest that the Indian public's commitment to NFU is not immutable. Should Indian leaders decide to launch a nuclear first strike, public opinion would likely not be a constraint.^{xlv} As a similar scenario-based study in the United States by the same researchers showed, in this the Indian public is no different from the American public.^{xlvi}

Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo

In contrast to India, Pakistan is a hard case for the taboo because its military strategy relies explicitly on nuclear weapons to offset India's conventional superiority. Thus any evidence for the taboo in Pakistan would be unexpected and therefore particularly significant. On May 28, 1998, 17 days after India conducted five nuclear tests, Pakistan followed with its own series of six underground nuclear tests. Not surprisingly, Pakistan rejected India's proposal to sign a bilateral NFU agreement. In recent years, Pakistan, irritated by the 2008 U.S.-India deal on civil nuclear cooperation, has been steadily expanding its nuclear arsenal, increasing the number of warheads, stockpiling weapons-grade nuclear material, and expanding plutonium production facilities. Pakistan's development and testing of nuclear-capable short-range missiles is widely viewed as a destabilizing and potentially dangerous development — and a striking reversal of efforts since the end of the Cold War to phase out battlefield nuclear weapons.^{xlvii} Since such weapons are regarded as more “usable,” it suggests that Pakistani leaders would seriously contemplate use on the battlefield in the event of a military invasion by India. Indeed, Pakistan's highly risky posture of “asymmetric escalation” threatens the early use of battlefield nuclear weapons in response to an Indian attack with conventional weapons.^{xlviii} Pakistan has pledged no-first-use against non-nuclear states but has not ruled out first use against a nuclear-armed aggressor, such as India.^{xlix}

In crises with India, Pakistani leaders have been willing to publicly manipulate the risk of nuclear confrontation to induce Indian restraint and provoke external great-power involvement, primarily by the United States. During the 1999 Kargil conflict, when the Pakistan Army was suffering heavy casualties, Pakistan hinted that it was on the brink of using nuclear weapons. The crisis was only resolved after the U.S. placed heavy pressure on Pakistan. Similarly, in April 2002, at the height of the troop mobilization during the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks Crisis, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf warned that Pakistan was prepared to resort to nuclear weapons in the event of war.¹ In late May 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell

reminded Musharraf of the taboo on nuclear use. In a phone call Powell told Musharraf, “All this talk about nukes, you know, it’s unthinkable.” He added, “You know and I know that you can’t possibly use nuclear weapons ... it’s an existential weapon that has not been used since 1945. So, stop scaring everyone.”^{li} Musharraf apparently replied, “I know that.”^{lii}

It seems likely that Musharraf’s threat in this case was what scholars refer to as a “catalytic” use of a nuclear threat more than an actual threat of use. According to Vipin Narang, in a catalytic strategy, a regional state with a small number of nuclear weapons uses threats of their use to get a superpower — usually the United States — to intervene on its behalf to help de-escalate the conflict.^{liii} Although analysts of the catalytic strategy tend to have little to say about norms, the strategy actually assumes — and, in fact, depends for its successful operation on — the existence of a belief among leaders of third-party states that using nuclear weapons would be wrong. Why, for example, should U.S. leaders care whether India and Pakistan use nuclear weapons against each other? Such a war would not threaten the United States. Yet U.S. leaders do care, because the use of nuclear weapons anywhere would end the tradition of nonuse, violate the nuclear taboo, and likely produce devastating humanitarian consequences and possibly impacts on climate. It would thus open a Pandora’s box of unintended consequences including, perhaps, the normalization of nuclear use. Eroding the norm of nuclear nonuse would increase nuclear risks for everyone. Pakistani leaders are aware that U.S. leaders (and others) care about the taboo and nonuse (as the statements of Colin Powell above suggest). Hence the catalytic strategy of making public nuclear threats that provoke the urgent involvement of great-power leaders.

Catalytic threats work because they are public threats to violate a norm that third parties care about. More broadly, all threats of the use of nuclear weapons are threats to violate the taboo. At the same time, however, threat-making is also a part of deterrence. Whether Pakistani leaders’ nuclear threats are serious or are catalytic bluffs may be difficult to disentangle in any given case. Even Pakistani leaders themselves may not be sure (as Musharraf’s further comments below seem to indicate).

On balance, there is little evidence that nuclear decision-making in Pakistan would be constrained by normative concerns. Recent studies of the taboo in Pakistan concur that the taboo there is weak. As scholars note, there are several reasons for this: the military controls nuclear decision-making, civilian oversight is weak, there is no arms-control relationship with India, and the public knows little about nuclear weapons.^{liv} Pakistani strategic analysts tend to argue that Pakistan has been forced into a realpolitik situation by the military balance with India, as well as by the more favorable position granted to India in the international community, leaving Pakistan with “no choice” but to adopt an aggressive deterrent strategy. As one study concludes, “strategic concerns and an abiding fear of being defeated by

overwhelming Indian conventional forces overwhelm any moral considerations about whether to use nuclear weapons.”^{lv}

Further, Pakistani civil society would likely pose little constraint. Nuclear nationalism is strong and the public is very supportive of the nuclear program, with little awareness of the consequences of nuclear weapons. This means that leaders may feel unconstrained about threatening nuclear use. A small Pakistani anti-nuclear movement does exist, even if embattled, and continues to dissent from the discourse of nuclear nationalism.^{lvi} But it remains difficult for civil society groups to make headway in critiquing nuclear nationalism without the support of the international community in confronting Pakistan’s nuclear program. The Pakistan government and army aggressively promote the narrative that nuclear weapons are essential to Pakistan’s security and would be used if necessary, and corral scholars into publicly supporting such views.^{lvii} In contrast to India, in Pakistan (until recently), questions about whether to use nuclear weapons and whether their use should be constrained by normative concerns have traditionally not been widely debated “because there are few experts outside government who engage in discussions and studies of these issues.”^{lviii} This may be changing today as a new generation of younger security scholars is beginning to raise the issue.^{lix} Finally, unlike in most other countries, there appears to be “no visceral fear of nuclear war” in Pakistan.^{lx} Recent survey experiments conducted in Pakistan before the Pulwama Crisis, although not specifically about nuclear issues, suggest clear public support for escalating rather than de-escalating an unfolding crisis.^{lxi} In the wake of Pulwama, however, public opinion may be shifting, as I discuss further below.

Nevertheless, Pakistani leaders do seem aware of the taboo, as the story of Musharraf and Powell suggests, and may in fact have some reservations about nuclear first use. Pakistan has not made public its official nuclear doctrine, and thus it is highly ambiguous whether Pakistan’s policy is early use or last resort. The fact that nuclear analysts in Pakistan are engaged in ongoing debate over the precise threshold for nuclear use suggests that the taboo does have some salience. Pakistani leaders have at times made statements that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are for use in extremis. In 2002, Musharraf stated that “nuclear weapons are the last resort.”^{lxii} Khan, Miro, and Wueger have concluded that Pakistani leaders “value the norm of non-use and would be unlikely to break the nuclear taboo absent a threat it sees as existential.”^{lxiii} In a 2017 interview, Musharraf said that he had mulled over using nuclear weapons against India in 2002 but decided against it for fear of retaliation. He also recalled that he had many sleepless nights, asking himself whether he would or could deploy nuclear weapons.^{lxiv} In November 2008, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, in his first year in office, made the mistake of publicly supporting an NFU policy during an interview with the *Hindustan Times*. “I can assure you,” he stated, “that Pakistan will not be the first country ever to use

(nuclear weapons). I hope that things never come to a stage where we have to even think about using nuclear weapons (against India). Personally, I have always been against the very concept of nuclear weapons.”^{lxv}

It is hard to imagine a clearer statement of “taboo talk” than this. Naturally, the military establishment was shocked. It made clear that Zardari did not have the authority to change Pakistan’s nuclear policy. He returned to this theme after he was out of office, however. In a 2016 interview about the possibility of a clash over Kashmir, Zardari said that neither India nor Pakistan would use the bomb as a “weapon of aggression,” stating, “You can develop it, you can have it, you can display a photograph of it but nuclear weapons are no joke.”^{lxvi}

One may question whether Zardari’s statements are evidence of anything meaningful, since in an actual crisis, because of the civil-military imbalance in Pakistani national security decision-making, the military and not the president would control the use of nuclear weapons. In that sense, perhaps Zardari’s statements amount to cheap talk. Further, Zardari also had a reputation for pandering to Western audiences, so favorable references to the nonuse of nuclear weapons might be a strategy to curry favor with the West. Still, there is nothing cheap about normative talk that gets a president in trouble with his powerful military by casting moral doubt on its cherished weapons. Further, even if Zardari was speaking for the benefit of the West, reputational concerns — being instrumentally motivated by what others care about — is one important way norms have effect. Certainly, one factor that might inhibit Pakistani nuclear attacks on India is that they would kill many Muslims in India, which has a larger Muslim population than Pakistan.^{lxvii}

Pulwama and the Changing Discourse of the Nuclear Taboo

In the Pulwama Crisis of February 2019, both sides, but especially India, appeared willing to deliberately escalate, raising new questions about the status of nuclear restraint. The crisis suggested ominous trends for both deterrence and the nuclear taboo. After a Kashmiri suicide bomber killed 40 Indian policemen on February 14, 2019, in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi blamed Pakistan and vowed a strong response. On February 26, Indian warplanes crossed the LoC for the first time since 1971 to bomb a terrorist training camp near the Pakistani town of Balakot. India described this use of military fighters as a “non-military preemptive action” — presumably an effort at escalation control. In a tit-for-tat airstrike, Pakistan retaliated the next day by sending out its warplanes and shooting down an Indian fighter jet and capturing a pilot. As tensions rose, under pressure

from U.S. officials as well as China and other countries to de-escalate, Pakistan returned the pilot to India on March 1, describing the move as a gesture of peace.^{lxviii} Once again, U.S. diplomatic pressure played a key role in resolving the crisis. A particular source of alarm for Trump administration officials was the threats of missile attacks by each side, and apparent Indian government preparations to launch a conventional missile strike on Pakistan.^{lxix}

On balance, the crisis was an exercise in escalation in both behavior and rhetoric, accompanied by numerous false claims by both governments about what happened. Modi, facing an upcoming election and looking to appeal to Hindu hard-liners, had a strong incentive to take aggressive action. The spokesman for the Pakistani military responded with a veiled nuclear threat. Both sides mobilized their military forces in ways that enhanced the risk of inadvertent escalation through conventional attacks on nuclear-supporting capabilities. India placed its nuclear forces on increased readiness, including deploying a possibly armed submarine to sea, while moving the navy closer to the Pakistani coastline.^{lxx} Jingoistic and nationalistic media coverage of the events in both countries, featuring numerous fake videos, did little to foster restraint.^{lxxi} The sense of nuclear crisis loomed.

Coincidentally, on February 24, two days before the Indian military launched its reprisal strike on Balakot, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking at a book launch, publicly called for the importance of preserving the nuclear taboo. The present nuclear order is “coming under strain,” he worried, because of the “asymmetry in terms of doctrines, arsenals and technology.” For this reason, he argued, the “most important challenge today is to ensure that the nuclear taboo that has prevented its use since 1945 continues to be preserved.”^{lxxii} This statement was widely quoted in Indian newspapers.

It is unclear whether Singh had made this statement with an eye to the immediate crisis or whether it had any impact on officials in the Modi government. Singh had earlier spoken out several times on the value of the taboo when he was prime minister. In addition to his prominent 2010 summit statement with Barack Obama on the importance of “strengthening the six decade-old international norm of non-use of nuclear weapons,” on April 2, 2014, as he left office, he had affirmed that, as a responsible nuclear-armed state, “India supports the idea of a nuclear-weapon free world.” He also called on all the nuclear-armed states to join together to establish a global NFU norm.^{lxxiii} Thus his out-of-office statements were consistent with statements he had made while prime minister. The book he was introducing that day, *Nuclear Order in the 21st Century* by his former Special Envoy for Disarmament and Nonproliferation Rakesh Sood, itself referred to the central importance of preserving the nuclear taboo in its opening paragraphs.^{lxxiv} Earlier, in 2018 in an op-ed in *The Hindu*, Sood had argued that “the most important achievement of nuclear arms control is that the taboo against use of nuclear weapons has held since 1945.” Preserving the taboo would require bringing arms control “into

line with today's political realities.”^{lxxv} Thus, while we do not know whether Singh's 2019 statements influenced the Modi government, they are consistent with views that Singh expressed while in office.

The Modi government appeared to draw the opposite lesson from the Pulwama Crisis for the taboo, however. Rather than reaffirming the need for restraint, strategic stability dialogues, or arms control, instead Indian leaders boasted that the crisis showed that India could engage in higher levels of conventional strikes on Pakistan and still maintain escalation control. Speaking in front of packed crowds at an election rally on April 18, 2019, Modi asserted that, with the Balakot strike, India had called “Pakistan's nuclear bluff.” He then brandished India's nuclear weapons, boasting that India had the “mother of nuclear bombs,” and appeared to threaten to wipe out Pakistan with nuclear weapons: “I decided to tell [Pakistan], do whatever you want to do but we will retaliate.”^{lxxvi} Three days later, addressing another rally, he declared that India would not be deterred by Pakistan's nuclear weapons and that India's nuclear weapons were “not being kept for Diwali.”^{lxxvii} This appears to mean that nuclear weapons were not being set aside for some special occasion in the future, but could be used anytime.

Modi's bellicose comments, unprecedented for an Indian prime minister, provoked outrage, including explicit invocation of the taboo. The Pakistani foreign office condemned the statements as “against the norms of being a responsible nuclear state.”^{lxxviii} Sushant Singh, deputy editor of the *Indian Express*, tweeted in response: “One reason the use of nuclear weapons hasn't happened after 1945 is because it is a taboo to suggest their use. That moral cost and opprobrium of intimidating nuclear gestures has raised the bar for usage. Bringing that threshold down does no one any service, least of all India.”^{lxxix} Shyam Saran, former Indian foreign secretary, lamented that Modi had crossed a threshold with his remarks about India's nuclear weapons “delivered in a threatening tone.”^{lxxx} The Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace, an Indian nongovernmental organization umbrella for 200 peace groups, criticized Modi's “reckless rhetoric,” adding, “This is the first time that an Indian prime minister has used such language on India's nuclear deterrent. Nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction and any contemplated use of such weapons will be catastrophic.”^{lxxxi}

For their part, Pakistani leaders drew the conclusion from Pulwama and its aftermath that Indian leaders were pursuing counterforce strategies and becoming more willing to risk the use of nuclear weapons. The Indian defense minister's not-so-veiled threat to Pakistan on August 16, 2019, that the future of India's NFU policy “depends on circumstance” only served to reinforce this impression. The Pakistani strategic community also felt that India's cross-border strike had eroded Pakistan's nuclear deterrent and made Pakistan more vulnerable to India's conventional superiority. Therefore Pakistan must be more willing to escalate up the

ladder of violence in response.^{lxxxii} As laid out in remarks by retired General Khalid Kidwai, the former director general of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division and an authoritative voice on Pakistan's nuclear policy, Pakistan would adopt a "Quid-Pro-Quo Plus" response to a conventional military strike from India — meeting India's use of force and adding a little bit more.

Two months after the crisis, Major General Asif Ghafoor, controversial spokesperson of the Pakistani military and active Twitter user, appeared to redefine Pakistan's nuclear weapons as for deterrence rather than use. In a response to Modi's Diwali remark, at a press conference on April 29, 2019, he stated, "Nuclear powers are not a threat, they are a weapon of deterrence that should not be mentioned lightly ... do not test our resolve."^{lxxxiv} At a press conference a month later, Ghafoor said that the mutual possession of nuclear weapons "eliminates the possibility of conventional war between the two states. ... this is a weapon of deterrence and a political choice. *No sane country having this capability would talk about using it.*"^{lxxxv} While these statements indirectly invoked the taboo, they appear to be mostly an instrumental effort to publicly position Pakistan as the restrained, responsible state in contrast to Modi's escalationist and reckless rhetoric.

Others went even further. According to Zafar Jaspal, professor at Quaid-I-Azam University, "at no time during the post-Pulwama crisis did Pakistan intimate the use of nuclear weapons." He argued that Pakistan avoided escalation because "its ruling elite believes in the nuclear taboo, i.e. an all-out nuclear conflagration is unthinkable."^{lxxxvi} Is this claim overstated? It may reflect both some truth as well as an effort to enhance the legitimacy of Pakistan by associating it more strongly with the norms of nuclear restraint. At the same time, the reference to "all-out nuclear conflagration" might leave open the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which Pakistani leaders hope can be contained without escalation.

There is some evidence that, in the wake of Pulwama, Pakistani public opinion may be shifting. According to a Gallup Pakistan poll conducted March 2-5, 2019, "The vast majority of Pakistanis recognize the destructive power of atomic warfare" between India and Pakistan. The poll found that 88 percent of Pakistanis believe a nuclear war with India will lead to tens of millions of casualties or more.^{lxxxvii} Further, in a striking finding, 60 percent of Pakistanis oppose using nuclear weapons first in a military conflict with India (28 percent were in favor of using nuclear weapons first, while 12 percent did not know or did not wish to respond). However, if a war with India did happen, 44 percent of Pakistanis believe that "if war requires it, Pakistan would use nuclear weapons" (and 41 percent believe it would not). For a country dominated by the passions of nuclear nationalism, these findings are quite remarkable. They suggest an increasing awareness of the consequences of nuclear use. Ironically, it may be that Balakot moved India farther away from the taboo and Pakistan closer.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that a discourse of the taboo clearly exists in both India and Pakistan, and further, that the taboo clearly matters to some leaders in each country. Nevertheless, the nuclear taboo is fragile in South Asia because perceptions of the security dilemma are entrenched in decades of carefully nurtured grievances, the two countries are unwilling to compromise on Kashmir, and they have failed to stabilize their nuclear relationship in arms-control institutions or to cultivate the development of shared nuclear norms. External actors have also failed to confront the growing nuclear programs of both sides. Further, resurgent nationalist and religious sentiment in both countries fan the flames of conflict escalation.

India has generally held the taboo — it continues to maintain a NFU policy, it has typically maintained restraint in conflicts, and has a long-standing domestic discourse about nuclear policy that includes moral and normative aspects. India has traditionally resisted concepts of deterrence that rely on nuclear war-fighting capabilities and counterforce targeting. It is clear that the taboo matters to some Indian leaders (some of whom internalized it, such as Nehru and perhaps Singh) and others for reasons of reputational concerns. At minimum, Indian leaders think the rest of the world (or powerful states) think the taboo matters, and so it matters to them. Indian leaders have delivered more mixed messages to the public than Pakistani leaders have, however, sometimes condemning nuclear weapons as abhorrent weapons while at other times, especially more recently, implying that they are usable weapons and praising them as symbols of Hindu nationalism.

Today, however, India appears to be in a situation of doctrinal drift away from its NFU policy and strategic restraint. Indian leaders appear to be trading strategic restraint for strategic manipulation and embracing greater escalation risks. India's identity as a "responsible" nuclear state has been carefully constructed since 1998, but it can be deconstructed as well. With its pursuit of escalation dominance capabilities, India may now be in the process of squandering its hard-earned reputation as a "responsible" nuclear state, what one analyst referred to as a process of nuclear "unlearning."^{xc}

Some scholars defend India's strategic developments as fully respectful of the taboo because India's nuclear practices are no more aggressive than superpower nuclear behavior during the Cold War, the era when the taboo arose. According to Paul Kapur, Indian leaders "will respect the nuclear taboo in roughly the same manner, and to the same degree, as did the traditional nuclear states, whose purportedly restrained behavior originally gave rise to the [taboo]

concept.”^{xcii} Like the superpowers, Kapur argues, India will use nuclear weapons as instruments of coercion while avoiding their use for warfighting.^{xciii} Kapur suggests that even if India eliminated its NFU policy, it would be doing no worse than the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Thus, Kapur concludes, “if the nuclear taboo is weakened during the second nuclear age, it is unlikely to be because of India.”^{xciii}

While Kapur’s point that India’s nuclear behavior may be no worse than that of the major nuclear powers is correct, his materialist analysis fails to grasp the nature of the taboo and what constitutes evidence for the strengthening and weakening of norms. Norms are dynamic and recursive; what happens in an earlier period affects the strength of the norm in a later period. If going “backward” on restraint (eliminating NFU policies and adopting counterforce, escalatory, and other aggressive weapons and policies) is not evidence of a weakening of the taboo, it is hard to know what would constitute such evidence. With its NFU policy, India — like China — has codified the nuclear taboo in its nuclear doctrine (and, in that regard, has done “better” than the superpowers). India may be no worse than the superpowers, but it may also no longer be better. In that sense, India is weakening the taboo.

Why are Indian leaders weakening the taboo? At least some have concluded that their minimalist nuclear doctrine has not deterred Pakistan’s terrorist provocations or Pakistani leaders’ apparent willingness to risk escalation, and so they need something more aggressive. Further, Indian leaders have become “cumulatively emboldened” by the absence of international pushback “against actions that cross salient thresholds, such as the Balakot airstrikes,” to behave more assertively toward Pakistan.^{xciv} Hindu populist nationalism is also undermining India’s traditional nuclear restraint. Yet it is hard to see how a more aggressive, riskier nuclear posture provides any real solution to the problem of Pakistan-supported terrorism. Rather, taking actual measures to resolve the Kashmir problem will do more to end the terrorist attacks than a more aggressive nuclear arsenal.

The nuclear taboo is weak in Pakistan because Pakistani leaders see nuclear weapons as their ultimate defense against a more powerful India, civilian oversight of the military is weak, nuclear nationalism is strong, and there has been little domestic debate. Unlike India, where prominent leaders such as Nehru spoke out publicly against nuclear weapons, in Pakistan leaders such as Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto spoke positively and publicly about Pakistan’s nuclear program. Because the Pakistani public knows little about nuclear weapons and their effects, leaders may feel unconstrained about threatening to use nuclear weapons. It may be, however, that as the military balance becomes even more menacing, Pakistani leaders will come to more deeply appreciate that conventional provocations under the nuclear shadow are unacceptably risky. There is also evidence that the Pakistani public, post-Pulwama, is becoming more aware of the consequences of nuclear use. As a first step, a younger generation of security

experts is positioned to expand the discussion of the taboo and nonuse in Pakistan, a welcome development.

The United States has played a significant role in preserving the norm of nonuse in South Asia by mediating crises and encouraging restraint.^{xcv} This role is likely to remain crucial for the foreseeable future. Today, however, the U.S. government itself is pursuing its own version of nuclear excess, even as the administration of President Joseph Biden is likely to be more supportive of arms control measures than was the administration of president Donald J. Trump. More broadly, as noted earlier, today the nuclear taboo is at risk around the world, as nuclear-armed states pursue modernization, embrace aggressive counterforce capabilities, and dismantle arms control. Recent reports paint an increasingly dire picture of South Asian crisis dynamics post-Pulwama as both India and Pakistan continue to upgrade their nuclear arsenals, abandon restraint in favor of the manipulation of risk, and demonstrate a willingness to cross thresholds to escalate.^{xcvi} Because of unresolved tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, as well as escalatory doctrines that increase the likelihood of use through miscalculation or misperception, the risk of nuclear use is perhaps highest in South Asia.^{xcvii}

What can India and Pakistan do to strengthen the taboo in South Asia? Beyond making a greater effort to resolve the Kashmir problem, Indian and Pakistani leaders should speak publicly about the 23-year tradition of nonuse in South Asia and the importance of preserving it. They should join with other nuclear powers in publicly reaffirming the 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev statement that “nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought.” Strong statements from leaders about the need to avoid using nuclear weapons can help reduce tensions, just as irresponsible tweets can increase them. Citizens and journalists should pose questions about the taboo to their national leaders.

Further, India and Pakistan should also build an arms-control relationship. They should reestablish a dialogue and work together to analyze inadvertent pathways to escalation and to eliminate force postures and capabilities that create fears of a disarming first strike. They should do more to associate themselves with the global nuclear normative order, including signing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. They should also take a greater leadership role in global arms control by fostering initiatives on restraint and transparency, including leading a global campaign for all nuclear-armed states — including Pakistan — to adopt no-first-use policies.^{xcviii} Finally, the two countries need more public education about the effects of nuclear weapons.

For 23 years, no Indian or Pakistani leader has launched nuclear weapons against the other. Today, it is hard to see how either country would be better off if it used nuclear weapons. It is not hard to imagine the shameful global legacy that will attach to any country

that breaks the nuclear taboo and unleashes nuclear destruction on a region of the world. It should be the highest priority of both countries to preserve and strengthen the nuclear taboo and to ensure that the tradition of nonuse continues forever.

ⁱ In this paper I distinguish use from testing. “Use” refers to military employment of nuclear weapons in a war.

ⁱⁱ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Indian Nuclear Forces,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 4 (July 2020): 217–225; and Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Julia Diamond, “Pakistani Nuclear Forces,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74 no. 5 (August 2018): 348–358.

ⁱⁱⁱ Portions of this section draw on Nina Tannenwald, “How Strong is the Nuclear Taboo Today?” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 89–109.

^{iv} Scott Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73–95. See also T. V. Paul, *The Tradition of Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

^v Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

^{vi} Barack Obama administration, White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Singh of India,” November 8, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/joint-statement-president-obama-and-prime-minister-singh-india>.

^{vii} Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*.

^{viii} On the negative side, arms control legitimized, and provided a cover for, a nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

^{ix} These included the Hotline Agreement, adopted in June 1963, the Limited Test Ban Treaty of August 1963, the Outer Space Treaty of January 1967, and the Latin American Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty signed in February 1967 (Alexander L. George, “U.S.-Soviet Efforts to Cooperate in Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance,” in Alexander L. George, Philip J. Farley, and Alexander Dallin, eds., *U.S.-Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Failures, Lessons*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 581–99).

^x Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks in Cadillac Square,” September 7, 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64, Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965).

^{xi} Feroz H. Khan, Anna Miro, and Diana Wueger, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo,” in *The Nuclear Taboo and Non-Western Regional Powers*, Paul S. Kapur, Feroz H. Khan, Michael S. Malley, and James A. Russell, Naval Postgraduate School, Project #NPS-N16-N173-A, May 2017, 15.

^{xii} George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

^{xiii} “Draft Report of the National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine,” August 17, 1999 at <https://mea.gov.in/in-focus/article.htm?18916/Draft+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine>; and Howard Diamond, “India Releases Nuclear Doctrine, Looks to Emulate P-5 Arsenal,” *Arms Control Today* 29, no. 5 (July/August 1999): 23.

-
- xiv Jasjit Singh, “Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine: Some Reflections,” September 1999 (emphasis in original). Singh was a member of India’s National Security Advisory Board.
- xv Harsh V. Pant, “India’s Nuclear Doctrine and Command Structure,” *Comparative Strategy* 24, no. 3 (2005): 277-293.
- xvi General Ved Prakash Malik, interview with Amitav Ghosh, New Delhi, August 1998, <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=6150>.
- xvii Yogesh Joshi and Frank O’Donnell, *India and Nuclear Asia: Forces, Doctrines and Dangers* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), chap. 4.
- xviii Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 101.
- xix Joshi and O’Donnell, *India and Nuclear Asia*.
- xx Joshi and O’Donnell, *India and Nuclear Asia*, 126-127.
- xxi The interview can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6tb2e809P4&feature=youtu.be>.
- xxii Kumar Sudaram and M. V. Ramana, “India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Journal of Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018): 152-168.
- xxiii Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*.
- xxiv Ibid.
- xxv Jayita Sarkar, “An Indian Anti-Nuclear Movement?,” IDSA Comment, July 28, 2011, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/AnIndianAntiNuclearMovement_jsarkar_280711.
- xxvi Bruce Riedel, “Remembering Sandy Berger and the Day He Saved the World,” Brookings, December 2, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/12/02/remembering-sandy-berger-and-the-day-he-saved-the-world/>.
- xxvii Sannia Abdullah, “Nuclear Ethics? Why Pakistan Has Not Used Nuclear Weapons ... Yet,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2018): 157-173.
- xxviii Mario E. Carranza, “Deterrence or Taboo? Explaining the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons during the Indo-Pakistani Post-Test Nuclear Crises,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 3 (2018): 441.
- xxix Quoted in Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 272.
- xxx Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015), 162.
- xxxi Timothy D. Hoyt, “Kargil: The Nuclear Dimension,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequence of the Kargil Conflict*, ed. Peter R. Lavoy (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 144-17.
- xxxii Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 272-3.
- xxxiii V. K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 143.
- xxxiv Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 108.
- xxxv Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 52.
- xxxvi Ashley J. Tellis, C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby, *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lesson from the Kargil Crisis* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2002), 31.
- xxxvii Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan and the Bomb*, 53.

xxxviii Joshi and O'Donnell, *India and Nuclear Asia*, 151-154.

xxxix See Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2018-2019): 7-52; and the critical response in Observer Research Foundation, "India and Counterforce: A Question of Evidence," Rajesh Rajagopalan, ORF Occasional Paper 247, May 2020.

xl Frank O'Donnell, "India's Nuclear Counterrevolution: Nuclear Learning and the Future of Deterrence," *The Nonproliferation Review* 26, no. 5-6 (2019): 407-426.

xli Gaurav Kampani, "Why India's Post-1998 Evolution as a Conventional Nuclear Power Provokes Surprise," *Journal of Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 1 (June 2019): 170-183.

xlii Scott D. Sagan, "Public Opinion, Commitment Traps, and Nuclear Weapons Policy," Center on Contemporary Conflict, November 2015, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/47776>; and Benjamin A. Valentino and Scott D. Sagan, "Atomic Attraction," *The Indian Express*, June 3, 2016.

xliii Valentino and Sagan, "Atomic Attraction."

xliv Ibid.

xlv For a comprehensive discussion of the Indian public's attitudes toward nuclear weapons, see Stimson Center, "Assessing Indian Nuclear Attitudes," Aditi Malhotra, Visiting Fellow Working Paper, 2016.

xlvi Scott D. Sagan, Daryl Press, and Benjamin Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 188-206.

xlvii While former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev committed to eliminating Soviet tactical nuclear weapons before the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and U.S. leaders have continued to press for their elimination, the Russian Federation continues to rely on tactical nuclear weapons. The United States itself is once again building tactical nuclear weapons, so the trend is largely being reversed.

xlviii Timothy Hoyt, "Pakistan's Nuclear Posture: Thinking about the Unthinkable?" in *Strategy in the Second Nuclear Age: Power, Ambition, and the Ultimate Weapon*, ed. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 181-200; and Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*.

xlvi Paul K. Kerr and Marybeth Nikitin, "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues," Congressional Research Service, August 1, 2016.

¹ Rory McCarthy and John Hooper, "Musharraf Ready to Use Nuclear Arms," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2002.

² Quoted in Stimson Center, *U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis*, Polly Nyack and Michael Krepon, Report 57, 2nd ed., 2014, 34.

³ Steven R. Weisman, "For 2 Ex-Generals, A Common Language," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2004.

⁴ Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 15-17.

⁵ Abdullah, "Nuclear Ethics?"; and Rizwana Abbasi, "Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo," *South Asian Voices*, April 22, 2016.

⁶ Kapur, Khan, Malley and Russell, *The Nuclear Taboo and Non-Western Regional Powers*, 3.

⁷ Zia Mian, "Wanted: An End to Nuclear Nationalism in South Asia," Princeton University, Program on Science and International Security, July 2013, <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/mian-2013.pdf>.

⁸ Khan, Miro and Wueger, "Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo," 23.

⁹ Ibid, 15.

^{lix} See Abdullah, “Nuclear Ethics?”; Abbasi, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo”; and Rizwan Asghar, “The Nuclear Taboo,” *The Daily Times*, January 24, 2017.

^{lx} Khan, Miro and Wueger, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo,” 23.

^{lxi} Christopher Clary, Sameer Lalwani, and Niloufer Siddiqui, “Public Opinion and Crisis Behavior in a Nuclearized South Asia,” Gallup Pakistan, June 14 2019, <http://www.niloufersiddiqui.com/papers.html>. The research was conducted in January-February 2018.

^{lxii} Zafar Khan, “Pakistan’s First Use Doctrine: Obsessions and Obstacles,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 1 (2015): 156.

^{lxiii} Khan, Miro and Wueger, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo,” 24.

^{lxiv} “Musharraf Planned to Use Nukes Against India after 2001 Attack, Claims Report,” *The Economic Times*, July 27, 2017.

^{lxv} Abdullah, “Nuclear Ethics?,” 164; and *The Indian Express*, “Pakistan Will Not Use Nukes First: Zardari,” November 22, 2008.

^{lxvi} *Hindustan Times*, “Zardari Rules Out Nuclear War Between Pakistan and India,” July 27, 2016.

^{lxvii} For absurd claims that Pakistan has special nuclear weapons that will kill only non-Muslims in India, see Naya Daur, “In Case of War Pakistan Will Use Special Weapons to Target India’s Non-Muslim Population Only: Sheikh Rasheed,” August 21, 2020.

^{lxviii} Sanjeev Miglani and Drazen Jorgic, “India, Pakistan Threatened to Unleash Missiles at Each Other: Sources,” Reuters, March 17, 2019.

^{lxix} Ibid.

^{lxx} While India has strongly hinted that its Arihant submarine was armed, this remains unconfirmed (O’Donnell, “India’s Nuclear Counterrevolution”).

^{lxxi} Farhad Majoo, “The India-Pakistan Conflict was a Parade of Lies,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2019.

^{lxxii} *The Hindu*, “Maintain Taboo on Nuclear Weapons, says Former PM Manmohan Singh,” February 25, 2019.

^{lxxiii} Cited in Ramesh Thakur, “The Inconsequential Gains and Lasting Insecurities of India’s Nuclear Weaponization,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 5 (2014): 1123.

^{lxxiv} Sood’s edited volume, published in 2019 and featuring a distinguished group of analysts from around the world, opens with the question, “This taboo has survived for over seven decades. The question is — can it hold in the 21st century?” Sood writes in his introduction that one of the challenges of today “is to retain the existing nuclear order while accepting its limitations. There needs to be a shift in priority, from preventing nuclear annihilation to preserving the nuclear taboo” (Sood, ed., *Nuclear Order in the 21st Century* [New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2019], 17).

^{lxxv} Rakesh Sood, “Preserving the Taboo: On Nuclear Arms Control,” *The Hindu*, November 6, 2018.

^{lxxvi} Ben Brown, “India Threatens Pakistan with ‘Mother of Nuclear Bombs’; Where’s Trump?” CCN.com, April 18, 2019; and Saima Aman Sial, “Lessons Learnt from the Balakot Strikes: The View from Pakistan,” *South Asian Voices*, March 7, 2020.

^{lxxvii} *India Today*, “Our Nuclear Weapons Are Not for Diwali: PM Modi on Pak’s Nuclear Button Threat,” April 21, 2019.

^{lxxviii} Kamran Yousaf, “Pakistan Denounces Modi’s Nuclear Threat as ‘Highly Unfortunate and Irresponsible,’” *The Express Tribune*, April 22, 2019.

^{lxxix} Sushant Singh, Twitter comment, April 21, 2019, <https://twitter.com/SushantSin/status/1120023703457288194>.
February 2021

^{lxxx} Shyam Saran, “Modi Should Know India’s Status as a Nuclear Weapons State Demands Responsible Leadership,” *ThePrint*, April 23, 2019 (quoted in Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, “Nuclear Trigger-Happy: India or Pakistan?,” *Global Village Space*, May 7, 2019).

^{lxxxi} Firstpost.com, “Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace Condemns Modi’s ‘Reckless Rhetoric’ after Diwali Nuke Remark,” April 25, 2019.

^{lxxxii} Praveen Swami, “Pakistan Likely to Be of Two Minds to Retaliate after IAF Strikes, India Can Ill-afford to Lower Its Guard,” Firstpost.com, February 27, 2019; and Sial, “Lessons Learnt from the Balakot Strikes.”

^{lxxxiii} General Khalid Kidwai, keynote address, “South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control” workshop, February 6, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/02/7th-iiss-and-ciss-south-asian-strategic-stability-workshop>.

^{lxxxiv} Snehash Alex Philip, “Two Months after Balakot, Pakistan Changes Nuclear Weapons Tune – They’re for Deterrence Only,” *ThePrint*, April 30, 2019.

^{lxxxv} Tasnim News Service, “Pakistan Sees Nukes as Deterrence, ‘Insane’ to Talk about Use: Army,” May 25, 2019, also in *The News International*, May 25, 2019. Italics added.

^{lxxxvi} Zafar Jaspal, “Nuclear-Trigger Happy: India or Pakistan?” *Global Village Space*, May 7, 2019.

^{lxxxvii} “Public Opinion Report on Pulwama and Post-Pulwama India-Pakistan Relations,” Gallup Pakistan, March 29, 2019, <http://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/29.03.19-English.pdf>.

^{lxxxviii} Gallup and Gilani Pakistan Poll, March 20, 2019, <http://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20.03.19-English.pdf>.

^{lxxxix} Gallup and Gilani Pakistan Poll, March 28, 2019, <https://gallup.com.pk/post/26226>.

^{xc} O’Donnell, “India’s Nuclear Counterrevolution.”

^{xci} Paul Kapur, “India and the Nuclear Taboo,” in Kapur, Khan, Malley, and Russell, *The Nuclear Taboo and Non-Western Regional Powers*, 14.

^{xcii} *Ibid.*, 10.

^{xciii} *Ibid.*, 7.

^{xciv} Stimson Center, “From Kargil to Balakot: Southern Asian Crisis Dynamics and Future Trajectories,” Sameer Lalwani et al., Asia Policy Paper, February 2020, 15.

^{xcv} Abbasi, “Pakistan and the Nuclear Taboo”; Abdullah, “Nuclear Ethics?”; and Stimson Center, “U.S. Crisis Management.”

^{xcvi} Stimson Center, “From Kargil to Balakot.”

^{xcvii} *New York Times* Editorial Board, “This Is Where a Nuclear Exchange Is Most Likely (It’s Not North Korea),” *New York Times*, March 7, 2019.

^{xcviii} For many excellent ideas for confidence-building and arms control in South Asia, many by young South Asian scholars, see Michael Krepon, Travis Wheeler, and Liv Dowling, eds., *Off Ramps from Confrontation in Southern Asia* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, May 2019); and Frank O’Donnell and Alexander K. Bollfrass, “India is Building Nuclear Submarines and ICBMs. That’s a \$14 Billion Mistake,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 26, 2020.