



**Nuclear deterrence and the prevention of war: the case study of
India and Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

There are a number of existing theories of deterrence, mainly nuclear deterrence, that explain how states avoid the probability of war when they acquire nuclear power. While most theories generally explain how states deter each other, there is also a deterrence debate between the IR scholars Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan over nuclear proliferation assuring security and nuclear proliferation increasing the threat of destruction. Similarly, the stability-instability paradox provides how deterrence lowers the likelihood of war, but the minor skirmishes continue. Under these different theories of deterrence, this paper studies the case of deterrence between India and Pakistan, the two nuclear neighbors and adversaries.

Keywords: Deterrence, Nuclear, War, Stability-instability, India, Pakistan.

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Introduction

After the USA built and used nuclear bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, near the conclusion of World War II, nuclear weapons became a contentious issue in international relations. Nuclear weapons were a major point of contention during the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, and the issue has since remained.

From the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a strong focus on the issue of the spread and control of nuclear weapons. This is a hotly debated topic as two contrasting hypotheses contend on the issue of spread, control, and abolition to sustain existing regional and international security.

According to the deterrence theory, threats or restricted use of force by one entity can persuade another party to avoid taking excessive action.

In mainstream international relations, the nuclear deterrence theory is generally in the two similar yet varying conceptual frameworks provided by the leading scholars Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan over the ongoing presence of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century and why governments keep them. They co-authored “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate”¹ and analyzed why countries would choose to undertake a nuclear weapons advancement plan and the political repercussions this has on both a regional and regional international level using modern contemporary international relations theory.

Thomas Schelling notes that nuclear weapons give countries the potential to dismantle not only their adversaries but also the majority of humanity without prompt retaliation as there is no imaginable defense mechanism. A nation’s deterrence strategies are strengthened by a significant threat of such catastrophic devastation, which generates political pressure and tactical impasse that can result in proxy wars.²

The stability-instability paradox claims that when two nations acquire nuclear weapons, the likelihood of a physical confrontation among them lowers. However, there is an increase in the number of smaller or less direct wars between them.

This paper will evaluate the prevailing use and controversial nature of nuclear weapons, correlate the rationale behind states wanting to go after nuclear proliferation, and assess the

¹ Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

² Thomas Schelling, “The Diplomacy of Violence,” in *Theories of Peace and Security*, ed. John Garnett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), 64–84.

influence on global security and how India and Pakistan as the only two nuclear states in the South Asian region are attempting to resist the nuclear escalation through the understanding of the different theoretical frameworks that explain deterrence among nuclear states.

Deterrence theory

It stipulates that nations can prevent violence by persuading would-be aggressors that certain actions would be prohibitively expensive. In sum, it is predicated on a variety of elements, including a willingness to accept the consequences of the war and the power to respond in such a way that such costs become unbearable. Additionally, the deterrence technique relies heavily on credibility. The credible threat of assault or reprisal enables such deterrence to be effective.

Deterrence used to be dependent on traditional military forces, but following the advent of nuclear weapon, nuclear deterrent became the dominant mode of deterrence. Generally, hostile acts are significantly difficult to counteract when it comes to nuclear weapons. The rationale seems to be that even a smaller chunk of the nuclear weapons that might survive a retaliatory attack would be sufficient to entail incomprehensible costs. This was particularly the case during the early Cold War, while there was nothing as the means of protecting against a nuclear assault, with considerably more effective anti-missile systems, the risk of a second strike (even if relatively limited) was not to be underestimated. Nuclear deterrence is predicated on mutually assured destruction, which would occur in the event of a full-scale conflict.

Subsequently, the interaction between two nuclear-armed states becomes a competition of “brinkmanship,” in which states try to compel the other to escalate the fight and take it to the ‘brink’ of nuclear destruction.³

Thomas Schelling’s Nuclear deterrence theory

Prior to the pervasive utilization of SSBN submarines, or guaranteed second strike potential, or prompt retaliation, Schelling conceded in his analysis that nuclear weapons give countries the potential to dismantle not only their adversaries but also the majority of humanity without prompt retaliation as there is no imaginable defense mechanism and nuclear weapons can be implemented quickly. A nation’s deterrence strategies are

³ Robert Powell, “Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (April 2003): 86–118, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951108>.

strengthened by a significant threat of such catastrophic devastation, which also generates political pressure and tactical impasse that can result in proxy wars.⁴

Kenneth Waltz's Rational deterrence theory

Kenneth Waltz⁵ believed that nations in world politics are in a condition of full anarchy, with no authority or feeling of control, mistrust is rampant, and the international structure is predicated on the core principle of reliance on self as “self-help.” The strategic rationale of self-help, from a practical standpoint, argues that nations must establish their own independent sovereignty and security to guard against domestic and foreign threats.

When it comes to nuclear weapons, Waltz is a strong proponent of ‘rational deterrence theory,’ in which he divides the military notions of defense and deterrence into two distinct, wholly independent conceptions. Deterrence, according to Waltz, is the concept of intimidating individuals into not doing anything. Not just for defense, but also to dissuade a state from striking since the enemy’s predicted retaliation may culminate in one’s harsh retribution, underscoring nuclear weapons’ entire, explosive potential.

Deterrence is the notion of provoking someone to stop from undesirable activity by presenting him with a reaction with drawbacks for him trumping the benefits of the action. Waltz’s confidence in a powerful defense to discourage an assault is based on the assumption that the defensive country will penalize the attacker. Since the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) renders nuclear conflict intellectually abhorrent, Waltz advocates nuclear proliferation.

Another aspect of the theory is the concept of ‘second strike’ potential, which allows a state to strike back at an enemy even if they have been hit hard.

Waltz’s theory continues, claiming that governments with nuclear weapons are “highly apprehensive” and that they will not fight if the result would be them potentially losing more than the gains

⁴ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. (S.L.: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁵ Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

Scott Sagan's Nuclear deterrence theory

Scott Sagan,⁶ on the other hand, argues that nuclear proliferation and governments' efforts to build nuclear weapons are based on assumptions he created from historical data and facts gathered since the invention of nuclear weapons and the first atomic weapon. Nuclear weapons programs are not apparent or unavoidable answers to international insecurity concerns. Sagan concludes rather, they are solutions hunting for a problem to tie themselves to so that their presence may be justified. From an organizational standpoint, Sagan's study yields a negative attitude toward preemptive nuclear war since it highlights military prejudices that might encourage such assaults.

The security dilemma in international relations may also lead to nuclear proliferation since rising international tensions can lead to arms races. In the Cold War, the USA and the USSR were in direct competition to produce as many nuclear weapons as possible. Unregulated nuclear proliferation would result in a broad rise in nuclear weapons throughout the globe, which is the premise of the security dilemma concept.

Precisely, Scott Sagan contends that even if the assumption that deterrence typically works is accepted, deterrence failures still weigh more than their advantages, and the repercussions of such failings are so severe with nuclear weapons that any improvements in conventional deterrence are outweighed.

The stability-instability paradox

Another international relations theory about the impact of nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction is the stability-instability paradox. It claims that when two nations acquire nuclear weapons, the likelihood of a physical confrontation among them lowers but that the likelihood of smaller or less direct wars grows.⁷ This happens because rational agents seek to prevent nuclear wars; as a result, they don't initiate large hostilities or let lesser wars turn into major ones, allowing them to engage in minor wars. For example, the US and the USSR conducted proxy wars in a number of countries, including Afghanistan, the Middle East, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Korea, and other nations during the Cold War, investing a lot of resources just to have more control than the other in the global South.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>.

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Nuclear weapons enable further smaller-scale battles while also promoting tactical security and preventing large-scale hostilities. There is a higher likelihood of conflict whenever one country has nuclear weapons and their adversary does not. On the other hand, the likelihood of conflict dramatically decreases when both countries share nuclear weapons.

The Case of India and Pakistan

With the theoretical frameworks discussed above, the case study will try to understand how nuclear deterrence in South Asia is working between Pakistan and India, the two nuclear neighbors and adversaries.

Historical background

Following its independence from the British Empire, India was divided into two countries, essentially along cultural divergences. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was established in the West, whereas the Republic of India was established in the Eastern (predominantly Hindu) part. But the divide did not come without consequences, with religious communities fleeing in massive numbers and hundreds of thousands of people killed in communal bloodshed.⁸

The ongoing conflict over the area of Jammu and Kashmir, which both nations claim possession of, is linked to religious problems. As a consequence, the newly independent countries fought the 1947 war. Kashmir was essentially a land of Muslims with a Muslim majority but remained part of primarily Hindu India. The conflict ceased after two years when the Line of Control, a strongly fortified barrier between the two countries, was established.⁹

The Fall of Dhaka in 1971 was another significant turning point in Indo-Pakistani relations. With the independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh), the conflict came to a conclusion. The Simla Agreement (from 1972) provided the groundwork for constructive discussion¹⁰ between the countries and their commitment to nonviolent values and the goal of finally transforming the Line of Control in Kashmir into a regular (demilitarized) national boundary. Both governments are also committed to respecting one another's territorial

⁸ Abby Pokraka, "History of Conflict in India and Pakistan," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, November 26, 2019, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/history-of-conflict-in-india-and-pakistan>.

⁹ Abdul Majid and Mahboob Hussain, "KASHMIR: A Conflict between India and Pakistan," *South Asian Studies a Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 149–59, http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/10%20Abdul%20Majid_v31_no1_jan-jun2016.pdf.

¹⁰ DAWN InpaperMagazine, "A Leaf from History: Simla Agreement, at Last," DAWN.COM, September 23, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/751253>

sovereignty. Despite the fact that the fight and ensuing treaty resulted in an unusual duration of calm between the two nations, Bangladesh's independence undermined Pakistan's situation even further and provided it with yet another excuse to look for more efficient deterrents.

The potential of nuclear engagement

The 1990 Kashmir Crisis was on the verge of escalating into a full-fledged military conflict, but Pakistan's fears of nuclear aggression and influence from third parties (such as Washington), contributed to a diplomatic settlement. In this situation, India convincingly projected its nuclear capability by persuading other countries of its determination to accomplish its objectives by any reasonable means. Pakistan had little choice but to de-escalate because it most likely did not have nuclear weapons (which were at that time still under development).

The Kargil Crisis of 1999 is the second instance of nuclear deterrence in action. It, again, focused on Kashmir, but this time on the key location of Kargil. This location is much outside the Line of Control, and its seizure by Pakistani troops would jeopardize vital supplies and communications. Unlike past crises in which both countries' nuclear capacities were uncertain, nuclear tests conducted by both countries in the 1990s demonstrated that both governments were conscious of the legitimacy of one other's arsenals. India was well aware of the consequences that an aggressive invasion of Pakistani territory would bring. Even if there were Indian preparations to invade Pakistan, stern orders were issued not to breach the Indo-Pakistan boundary.

This might be viewed as a triumph for Pakistani nuclear deterrence since the country effectively showed its willingness to deploy nuclear weapons and the legitimacy of its strength through nuclear tests in 1998.

Principles and Nuclear Potential

India was the first of the two countries to showcase its nuclear capabilities, conducting its first nuclear test with the 1974 Operation Smiling Buddha¹¹ despite originally opposing the construction of nuclear armaments based on Gandhian beliefs. India seemed to need to establish an effective deterrence policy to protect itself from its neighboring

¹¹ Abby Pokraka, "History of Conflict in India and Pakistan," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, November 26, 2019, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/history-of-conflict-in-india-and-pakistan>.

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competitors, Pakistan and China, due to ongoing tensions with both. India has around 150 nuclear bombs dedicated to this goal.¹²

In terms of nuclear doctrine, India adheres to a strict no-first-use rule. While such a policy is prevalent and respected, it comes with its own array of deterrent problems. Because deterrence is a form of brinkmanship in many aspects, a lack of will to safely use nuclear weapons might make the country appear less determined. Additionally, the no-first-use policy means that nuclear weapons will not be utilized in the event of a traditional assault, and thus only provides minimal deterrence over non-nuclear dangers on its own. Apart from the inherent drawbacks of maintaining nuclear weapons merely for the purposes of reprisal, India has practical reasons for doing so. Moreover, the idea that India was the first to launch nuclear weapons provided Pakistan with additional motivation to expand its own program. After failing to persuade India of its nuclear capabilities during the 1990 crisis, the country's nuclear program was operational in the late 1990s, and it played a key part in the Kargil conflict.

Pakistan did not follow the no-first-use rule because of its status as a competitor with little chance of winning, since it needed its nuclear arsenal not just to deter Indian nuclear weapons but also its traditional troops.

There are four scenarios in which Pakistan may deploy nuclear weapons. These are

1. Geographical: acquisition of critical territories in Pakistan
2. Military: annihilation of Pakistan's military forces
3. Financial: violent limiting of potential growth - naval blockade
4. Political: outside instability and promotion of breakaway, as in Bangladesh

The final two of these circumstances are particularly troubling since Pakistan's political and economic instability might be the outcome of the country's delicate domestic situation, which could become unstable even without Indian participation.

Nuclear deterrence

Under the nuclear boundary, India and Pakistan are exploring new technologies and capabilities that might jeopardize one other's defense. The lessons that they learn from previous crises, and the unfamiliar region they are currently venturing into necessitates

¹² Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "India and Pakistan," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/countries/india-and-pakistan/>.

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informed judgment about their doctrines, nuclear and conventional capabilities, and the unpredictability of their consequences in future crises.

As of now both India and Pakistan have enough nuclear weapons to maintain a powerful and relatively stable bilateral nuclear deterrence. Nuclear proliferation calls into question professed minimalist goals, concerns a high-cost weapons race and threatens overall deterrent stability. The rise of China as nuclear power is exacerbating India's security concerns. However, the determinants of the India–Pakistan nuclear deterrence and security dynamic lie virtually fully at the disposal of India and Pakistan authorities.

Only the two countries may choose to effectively face adversity by implementing new assessment methods as a temporary but practical stopgap until confidence is built and political engagement is established, allowing for weapons control.

The prospects

India and Pakistan could try to utilize the threat of escalation to gain an advantage over each other, much as they did during the Cold War, in the hopes that the enemy will retreat.

While the threat of nuclear escalation may deter conflicts and crises, nuclear weapons may make such occurrences more deadly if they occur.

India and Pakistan may assume that they can occasionally operate securely below a mainstream-nuclear firewall. But if they differ on where that line is, it could be potentially dangerous

This mindset is particularly concerning, considering that India, as the Cold War US, may be attempting to avoid MAD. India is contemplating building forces that might attack Pakistan's nuclear weapons ahead of time.¹³ If India feels it has this capacity, it may attack first if Pakistan threatens to use nuclear weapons. However, if Pakistan felt India believed so, Pakistan would have strong incentives to attack first.

The involvement of nuclear weapons in this standoff appears to have some constraining impact (based on prior crisis evaluations), as no crisis, no matter how terrible,

¹³ Caitlin Talmadge, "Are Nuclear Weapons Keeping the India-Pakistan Crisis from Escalating—or Making It More Dangerous?," Brookings (Brookings, March 8, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/08/are-nuclear-weapons-keeping-the-india-pakistan-crisis-from-escalating-or-making-it-more-dangerous/>.

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has developed into a full-scale war. However, the fact that there is always a threat of escalation suggests that the conflict has come to a standstill. Neither party is motivated to reach an agreement because neither feels the other is inclined to exacerbate the situation. As a result, nuclear weapons provide only limited protection while also posing the potential of an impossible-to-avoid nuclear war.

The most probable way for India and Pakistan to achieve more diplomatic and nuclear-deterrence security is to establish a solid, credible, dependable, and deniable communications channel between respective leaders. That's in the best interests, and how they implement it is up to them. Such a system would help India and Pakistan prevent or lessen the costs of future crises, as well as eventually assist them in adopting new Confidence Building Measures on the path to greater confidence.

Conclusion

From the historical pattern of physical confrontation between the two countries, all other theories of deterrence explain how the two nuclear states have avoided a major war in recent decades to prevent massive destruction. As the stability-instability paradox suggests, it is seen that while minor skirmishes continue taking place between India and Pakistan, the countries have so far managed to avoid a major war. As far as the Waltz-Sagan nuclear proliferation for security vs. nuclear proliferation towards destruction is concerned, the destruction that Sagan warns about has not been the case here; however, as theories, both are equally important to understand the dynamics of the region in terms of success and failure to maintain deterrence.