Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
January-June 2024 5(1), 2051–2061

SUB-CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT AND DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTHERN ASIA: BETWEEN THE BOMB AND THE BRINK

Shubham Rai [1]

[1] PhD Scholar, Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace & Conflict Resolution, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Focusing on India-Pakistan's conflict relations, this paper explores the intricate interaction of sub-conventional conflict, nuclear deterrence, and strategic stability in Southern Asia. Nuclearisation of Southern Asia has created a stability-instability paradox in which reciprocal nuclear deterrence lowers the likelihood of all-out conventional conflict even as low-intensity conflicts and crises continue to exist. In this paper, examine the development of Indo-Pakistani conflicts—from full-scale battles in the pre-nuclear era to proxy conflicts and terrorist incursions under the nuclear shadow and evaluate how nuclear capabilities have changed strategic behaviour. The paper creates a theoretical framework to examine how nuclear deterrence at the strategic level coexists with continuous sub-conventional conflicts by drawing on academic literature and current occurrences. The results show that whereas nuclear weapons have created a kind of strategic stability by preventing large-scale conflict, they have also promoted proxy conflicts and constrained military operations, endangering regional peace. We contend that whether crises escalate or stay contained is shaped by credible deterrence, doctrinal postures, and confidence-building initiatives acting together. Enduring security in Southern Asia, the paper argues, will rely on managing sub-conventional threats, establishing nuclear red lines, and implementing bilateral risk-reduction initiatives to avoid miscalculations in this unstable nuclear context.

Keywords: Nuclear Deterrence, Strategic Stability, Southern Asia, Arms Race, Sub-Conventional Conflict

Corresponding Author

Shubham Rai,
shubham.rai317@gmail.com

DOI
10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4928

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Southern Asia, offers a unique situation of nuclear deterrence and conflict dynamics. Though they have had ongoing military problems and low-intensity conflicts, both countries have avoided full-scale conventional conflict in the decades following their overt nuclear power in 1998. This pattern represents what theorists call the "stability–instability paradox", whereby mutual nuclear deterrence greatly lowers the probability of full-fledged conflict while paradoxically allowing regular little conflicts (Snyder, 1961; Watterson, 2017). Indeed, since their third conventional conflict in 1971, India and Pakistan's enmity has changed: Calculating that its developing nuclear power would protect it from an overpowering Indian conventional response, Pakistan increasingly depended on sub-conventional methods, such as proxy militancy and terrorism (Kapur, 2005). India, for its part, has long practiced strategic restraint, restricting its military reactions to prevent crossing nuclear boundaries (Dasgupta & Cohen, 2011).

Indo-Pak tensions have stayed high even without another all-out conflict. Several crises—including the 1999 Kargil Conflict, the 2001–02 Twin Peaks standoff, the 2008 Mumbai assault, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot sub-conventional cycle have shown how fast the two nuclear-armed neighbours might approach the edge of conflict. Every crisis raised urgent questions regarding strategic stability: How strong is the stability of deterrence under provocation at lesser degrees of conflict? Might a conventional conflict or perhaps nuclear exchange result from a sub-conventional attack? This paper answers these issues by examining the interaction between sub-conventional conflict, nuclear deterrence, and strategic stability in Southern Asia. We especially want to know how nuclear weapons have changed the conflict behaviour between India and Pakistan and whether this trend has made the area more stable or more prone to hazardous escalation. We proceed by first reviewing relevant literature on deterrence theory, the stability–instability paradox, and South Asian security dynamics. Next, we outline a theoretical framework that links nuclear deterrence to different "levels" of conflict (sub-conventional, conventional, and strategic) and identifies key factors that mediate this relationship. We then apply this framework in an analysis of Southern Asia's conflict history and recent crises, drawing on qualitative evidence and quantitative conflict data. The analysis highlights how nuclear deterrence has constrained the scale of conflicts but also enabled a pattern of proxy warfare. Finally, we conclude with reflections on the implications for regional stability and policy measures that might strengthen deterrence stability while curbing the risks of sub-conventional provocations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. DETERRENCE AND STRATEGIC STABILITY

Deterrence theory has long been central to strategic studies. Classic theorists defined deterrence as dissuading an adversary from taking an unwelcome action by threatening severe consequences (Schelling, 1966; Snyder, 1961). Successful deterrence rests on a credible threat that convinces the adversary the costs of aggression will outweigh any gains. Traditional scholarship distinguishes between deterrence by punishment (threatening unacceptable damage in retaliation) and deterrence by denial (denying the enemy's objectives by robust defenses) (Morgan, 2003). Nuclear weapons greatly magnify deterrence by punishment: as Bernard Brodie famously noted, the chief purpose of a state's military posture "has become not to win conflicts but to avert them" once nuclear arsenals are in play (Brodie, 1946).

With the advent of the U.S.–Soviet nuclear rivalry, concepts of strategic stability emerged to describe conditions under which the risk of nuclear conflict is minimised. Strategic stability generally implies that neither side has an incentive to use nuclear weapons first or to escalate a conflict, usually because each has secure second-strike capabilities ensuring mutual assured destruction (Sigal, 1985). In stable deterrence relationships, even severe crises do not lead to nuclear use, as both parties recognise that it would be suicidal. Scholars also define related notions of crisis stability (the absence of pressures to pre-empt or escalate during a confrontation) and arms race stability (where neither side feels compelled to rapidly build up capabilities out of fear of falling behind) (Lieggi & Tankel, 2020). During the Cold Conflict, the superpowers developed understandings and controls to bolster stability, but they also engaged in proxy conflicts elsewhere, reflecting a form of the stability-instability paradox in their behaviour (Jervis, 1984).

2.2. THE STABILITY–INSTABILITY PARADOX

The stability–instability paradox is a theoretical concept proposing that when two competitors attain strategic nuclear stability (making full-scale conflict improbable), they may become more eager to participate in lower-intensity battles that fall below the nuclear threshold(Snyder, 1965; Watterson, 2017). In other words, strategic stability at the nuclear level can coexist with instability at lesser levels of violence. This paradox was first articulated in the Cold War context, but it has been frequently invoked to explain India-Pakistan interactions (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

Scholars have debated the applicability of this paradox to Southern Asia. On one hand, some argue that nuclear weapons have prevented another large conflict on the subcontinent since 1971, effectively "freezing" the conflict at lower levels (Ganguly, 2008). From this perspective, each side's fear of nuclear escalation has induced caution once crises reach a certain point, thereby upholding a fragile peace. On the other hand, analysts like S. Paul Kapur (2005, 2008) contend that South Asia's experience shows nuclearisation encouraging aggressive behaviour by the conventionally weaker, revisionist state of Pakistan. According to Kapur's research, Pakistan's possession of a nuclear backstop emboldened its military and terrorist proxies to initiate conflicts (such as the Kargil intrusion in 1999 or repeated cross-border terrorism in Kashmir) in the belief that India's responses would remain limited. Thus, while nuclear weapons stabilised one level

of conflict (deterring all-out conflict), they destabilised another (spurring proxy war and crises) – a textbook stability–instability paradox.

Empirical research supports this viewpoint. Quantitative data on Indo-Pakistani disputes suggest a large increase in militarised crises after the late 1980s, when both governments obtained nuclear capabilities, even as full-scale conflicts faded (Kapur, 2008; IISS, 2021). Between 1947 and 1989, for instance, the adversaries fought three significant conflicts but had rather few militarised crises in between years. By contrast, from 1990 to 2019—the de facto and overt nuclear period—they fought only once (the short Kargil Conflict) but participated in hundreds of border skirmishes, standoffs, and terrorist-triggered crises (Hagerty, 2020). The stability–instability pattern (Watterson, 2017) supports this negative correlation between conflict frequency and crisis frequency. Not all academics, nevertheless, support the paradox reading completely. Some point out that even in the nuclear age, Pakistan's risk-taking has been limited, and India has occasionally responded militaristically (as in the 2016 "surgical strikes" and 2019 “air strike”), implying that deterrence is not universal and that other elements (such as international pressure or domestic politics) also shape choices (O'Donnell, 2019; Yusuf, 2018).

2.3. SUB-CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN ASIA

Sub-conventional conflict is defined as hostile actions falling below the threshold of conventional open conflict between nations. These consist of localised skirmishes, cross-border terrorism, proxy conflicts, and insurgencies. Sub-conventional conflict has mostly focused on the contested area of Kashmir and on Pakistan's use of non-state terrorist organisations to pressure India in relation to India and Pakistan. Aptly characterising the trend in Kashmir after 1947, K. C. Dixit (2010) defines sub-conventional conflict as war "above peaceful coexistence but below full-fledged conflict". Both countries fought low-intensity conflict in Kashmir long before nuclearisation; Pakistan's backing of terrorist proxies grew especially after the 1980s. Major incidents include the Pakistan-backed insurgency in Indian Kashmir from 1989 onwards; the 1999 Kargil incursion (which Islamabad first represented as independent terror outfits); the 2001 Parliament attack and 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack by Pakistan-based groups; and more recent attacks such as Pathankot (2016), Uri (2016), and Pulwama (2019) (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Dixit, 2010).

Studies on South Asian security highlight that Pakistan partly shifted to asymmetrical tactics in reaction to India's conventional military dominance (Ganguly, 2016). Lacking confidence in winning a conventional war, Pakistan's military created a philosophy of "bleeding" India through a thousand cuts—i.e., protracted sub-conventional conflict—while its developing nuclear weapons served as a shield against significant Indian reprisals (Kapur, 2005). This approach fits Vipin Narang's (2014) definition of Pakistan's "asymmetric escalation" nuclear posture: a readiness to wave nuclear threats early in a confrontation to dissuade India's conventional power. Pakistan's fast growth of tactical nuclear weapons, such as the short-range Nasr missile, and its doctrinal focus on possibly utilising nuclear weapons to resist even a limited Indian invasion show this attitude (Narang, 2014; Dalton & Perkovich, 2016). The result is that Pakistan's nuclear strategy is intentionally meant to reduce the nuclear threshold as a means of offsetting conventional inferiority—practically utilising nuclear deterrence as cover for sub-conventional attacks. Indian experts frequently grumble that this enables Pakistan to fund terrorists without consequence, hence producing a kind of "nuclear blackmail" (Cohen & Dasgupta, 2011).

India's reaction to sub-conventional hostility has changed. Indian politicians in the 1990s and 2000s practised what has been called "strategic restraint", absorbing provocations such as the 2001 Parliament attack or the 2008 Mumbai attacks without significant military response (Dasgupta & Cohen, 2011). Given Pakistan's nuclear red lines, the reasoning was that a significant strike inside Pakistan could set off uncontrolled escalation. For example, during the 2001–02 Twin Peaks crisis, India sent its military but finally withdrew under U.S. diplomatic negotiations and worries about nuclear conflict (Yusuf, 2018). Recent studies, in the meantime, point to a possible change in India's approach. India chose measured reprisal assaults following smaller ones in 2016 and 2019: the 2016 "surgical strikes" against terrorist camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and the February 2019 Balakot airstrike on a Jaish-e-Mohammad base in mainland Pakistan (O'Donnell, 2019). These moves imply that Indian officials are looking for methods to penalise Pakistan's subconventional aggression without breaching the nuclear threshold. Some academics call this India creating a limited conflict doctrine sometimes called "Cold Start"—fast, little invasions remaining below the threshold to trigger a nuclear reaction (Dalton & Perkovich, 2016). Whether such limited use of force can be accomplished consistently without escalation is questioned, but it marks an important modification in the deterrence game between the two countries.

3. LITERATURE GAP

Though there is agreement that nuclear weapons have greatly changed the India-Pakistan conflict, views differ on whether the overall impact has been stabilising or destabilising. Earlier studies—for example, Hagerty, 1998, tended to highlight the deterrent stability attained, contending that rational leaders will finally pull back from the edge of nuclear conflict no matter how stressful the crisis. More recent studies are more ambivalent. They highlight the possibility of misinterpretation, accident, or unauthorised use causing a disaster, as well as ongoing near misses (Clary & Narang, 2019; IISS, 2021). Much of the literature also emphasises the bilateral Indo-Pak dyad of seclusion. Recent research advocates a more inclusive perspective, including China's influence and developing technologies. Southern Asia's strategic equation depends on China: India's nuclear armament was mostly created with China in mind; China's expanding arsenal affects Indian developments, which flow to Pakistan (O'Donnell, 2019). All bring fresh uncertainty—innovations like ballistic missile defences, multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), and possible nuclear submarine deployment by Pakistan (Clary & Narang, 2019). These elements cast doubt on arms race stability in the area—a subject that has only lately begun to get considerable academic focus.

All things considered, current studies lay the groundwork for comprehending the deterrence dynamics of Southern Asia; more study is required to include these revelations into a unified framework. The following part describes a theoretical framework for examining how sub-conventional conflicts interact with nuclear deterrence to affect strategic stability in South Asia.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper suggests a framework based on the idea of escalation stages and the conditional consequences of deterrence at each level to examine the relationship between sub-conventional conflict, nuclear deterrence, and strategic stability. This approach adds particular geographical elements—such as imbalance in conventional forces and state goals—to the stability–instability conundrum theory. Its three connected parts are,

4.1. CONFLICT LEVELS

The paper identifies three degrees of conflict intensity: sub-conventional, conventional, and strategic (nuclear). Sub-conventional includes insurgencies, terrorism, and minor battles; conventional refers to open combat with regular forces; and strategic refers to nuclear exchange or the edge thereof. In Southern Asia's environment, conflicts usually rise to a point (e.g., from sub-conventional to restricted conventional confrontations) but have stopped short of the strategic level since nuclearisation. This paper's approach suggests that while that same firebreak may reduce the perceived cost of sub-conventional or limited conventional operations, the presence of nuclear weapons creates a firebreak between the conventional and strategic levels since crossing into nuclear use is extremely expensive. This idea fits with Snyder's first idea: nuclear peace at the top, proxy war at the bottom (Snyder, 1965). Deterrence Dynamics at Each Level: Deterrence can operate (or fail) differently at each level. At the strategic level, mutual nuclear deterrence is in effect when both India and Pakistan have a secure second-strike capability and a credible threat of massive retaliation, yielding a condition of mutually assured destruction. This deters deliberate large-scale attacks by either side, as evidenced by the absence of full-fledged conflict post-1971 (Sigal, 1985; Hagerty, 2020).

At the conventional level, deterrence is asymmetric: India's superior conventional military is intended to deter Pakistan from major aggression, while Pakistan's conventional forces aim to deny an easy Indian victory. Historically, conventional deterrence failed in South Asia prior to nuclearisation (e.g., conflicts in 1965 and 1971 when Pakistan underestimated India's response). Today, Pakistan relies on the coupling of its conventional and nuclear strategies – threatening early nuclear use if overwhelmed – to deter an Indian conventional invasion (Narang, 2014). Finally, at the sub-conventional level, deterrence is weakest or largely absent. Traditional military deterrence has limited applicability against covert or deniable attacks by terrorists. India has struggled to deter Pakistan's proxy war tactics; the threat of all-out retaliation lacks credibility because it would be disproportionate and risky. Thus, Pakistan has often perceived a permissive environment at the sub-conventional level, calculating that India's responses will be restrained by higher-level deterrence dynamics (Kapur, 2008). Our framework therefore expects frequent sub-conventional conflicts unless alternative deterrent measures (like precision strikes or diplomatic pressure) fill this gap.

4.2. CROSS-LEVEL INTERACTIONS AND THE ESCALATION LADDER:

A core insight of this framework is that actions at one level influence stability at others. This paper conceptualises an escalation ladder in which a conflict can potentially climb from sub-conventional to conventional to nuclear. Nuclear deterrence tries to "lock" the top rungs of this ladder (prevent climbing to nuclear conflict), but climbing may still occur on the lower rungs. Each side's perception of the other's red lines and resolve will determine how far up the ladder they risk going (Morgan, 2003). For instance, if India believes it can conduct a limited conventional strike without provoking nuclear use, it might retaliate militarily to a terrorist attack, moving the conflict from a sub-conventional to a conventional level (as seen in the 2019 Balakot strike). Pakistan's decision to escalate further, such as using a tactical nuclear weapon if Indian forces invade its territory, is determined by its own deterrence calculations and command-and-control arrangements (Dalton & Perkovich, 2016). The framework emphasises the role of perceptions and misperceptions in these interactions. In a fast-moving crisis, misinformation or false confidence can cause leaders to overstep, undermining strategic stability. Conversely, clear signalling and communication can arrest the escalation ladder. This is where confidence-building measures (CBMs) and third-party mediation factor in as external stabilisers (Yusuf, 2018).

Using this framework, we can analyse historical cases to see how deterrence operated (or broke down) at different levels and how close the rivals came to moving up the escalation ladder. Key variables to consider include each state's military doctrines (e.g., India's no-first-use policy vs. Pakistan's first-use stance), their force postures (e.g., Pakistan's deployment of tactical nukes, India's pursuit of missile defenses), the presence of second-strike capabilities (e.g., India's nuclear triad versus Pakistan's nascent sea-based capabilities), and the influence of external actors (e.g., U.S. diplomatic interventions that effectively "deterrence by diplomacy"). By examining these factors, we aim to shed light on whether Southern Asia's nuclear deterrence is truly stabilising or if it is inherently unstable due to the unresolved sub-conventional conflict.

In the following analysis, the paper apply this framework to the empirical record of Indo-Pakistani relations, highlighting how sub-conventional conflicts have unfolded under the nuclear shadow and assessing the outcomes for strategic stability in the region.

5. FROM CONVENTIONAL CONFLICTS TO NUCLEAR CRISES: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

5.1. PRE-NUCLEAR ERA (1947–1971)

In the first few decades after independence, India and Pakistan fought three full-scale conventional conflicts (1947–48, 1965, and 1971). These conflicts were driven by territorial disputes (primarily over Kashmir in 1947 and 1965) and geopolitical shifts (the secession of East Pakistan leading to the 1971 conflict). In this period, nuclear weapons were absent, and deterrence was purely conventional. The conventional deterrence balance, however, was skewed—India's larger military and economy gave it an upper hand, which translated into Pakistan's defeat in each Conflict (Kapur, 2008). Notably, Pakistan initiated the 1965 Conflict partly under the misperception that India, weakened by a recent clash with China in 1962, would not fight effectively; this proved false and highlighted the perils of failed deterrence and miscalculation. The 1971 conflict was especially catastrophic for Pakistan, resulting in the loss of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The outcome of these conflicts underscored India's conventional dominance and made Pakistan acutely aware of its military inferiority (Chakma, 2005). In the immediate aftermath, both states began exploring nuclear options—India's "peaceful" nuclear test in 1974 and Pakistan's clandestine weapons program—to enhance their security and deterrence postures (Ahmad, 1999).

5.2. DE FACTO DETERRENCE (1980S–1998):

By the 1980s, India and Pakistan had both developed nuclear weapons capability, although they maintained a posture of ambiguity (neither officially declaring or testing a weapon until 1998). During this period of de facto deterrence, there were no full-scale conflicts, suggesting that even the uncertain presence of nuclear weapons had a cautionary effect. However, the period was not free of conflict. A major military crisis occurred in 1986–87 (Operation Brasstacks), when large Indian exercises near the border spooked Pakistan, which in turn mobilised, raising invasion fears. That standoff ended without conflict, in part due to U.S. diplomacy and possibly because Pakistani leaders hinted

at nuclear retaliation if attacked (Chari, 2003; Yusuf, 2018). Another significant event was the 1990 Kashmir crisis, when a mass insurgency in the Indian part of Kashmir (backed by Pakistan) led to Indian threats of cross-border strikes. The United States again intervened amid reports that both nations were preparing their nascent nuclear devices, successfully defusing the crisis (Talbott, 2004). These episodes demonstrated a nascent crisis stability emerging: even without fully tested arsenals, the possibility of nuclear use was sufficient to restrain escalation. At the same time, Pakistan's support for the Kashmir insurgency in the late 1980s and early 1990s exemplified the intensification of sub-conventional conflict under the safety umbrella of its developing nuclear deterrent (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

5.3. OVERT NUCLEAR ERA (1998–PRESENT):

In May 1998, India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests, declaring themselves nuclear-armed states. Observers hoped that overt nuclear status might "stabilise" the region through clear deterrence, but the result was a series of serious crises. Only a year after the tests, in 1999, Pakistan initiated the Kargil conflict by sending forces to infiltrate and occupy strategic heights on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Kashmir. This bold gambit was based on the assumption that India would not escalate the conflict into an all-out war or cross the international border for fear of nuclear escalation (Watterson, 2017). India responded with intense conventional force but carefully limited the theatre of conflict to its own side of the Line of Control; Indian forces, though superior, were constrained by political directives not to expand the conflict beyond Kashmir or use air power against Pakistani territory (Ganguly, 2001). Ultimately, under international pressure and facing military setbacks, Pakistan withdrew. The Kargil conflict was a watershed: it demonstrated that limited conflict was still possible under the nuclear shadow, but it also underscored extreme dangers. During the conflict, both sides reportedly readied nuclear-capable missiles, and Pakistani nuclear threats were conveyed through diplomatic channels (Sagan & Waltz, 2009). The conflict thus empirically illustrated the stability–instability paradox: strategic nuclear stability (neither side dared escalate to all-out conflict) coexisted with dangerous instability at the lower end (a high-altitude conflict fought with thousands of casualties).

The early 2000s saw further confrontations. Following a Pakistan-based terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, India undertook a massive military mobilisation (Operation Parakram), positioning troops along the international border. This "Twin Peaks" crisis (spanning 2001–02) was the tensest standoff since Kargil. For months, the two armies faced off, and fears of invasion and escalation ran high. Pakistan again signalled that any major incursion by India could meet a nuclear response, and India ultimately did not launch an attack (Yusuf, 2018). The crisis was diffused after intense U.S. and international engagement, but it led India to rethink its military doctrine. Indian strategists concluded that slow mobilisation had hamstrung their coercive diplomacy; thus was born the idea of Cold Start – a doctrine for rapid, limited thrusts into Pakistan to retaliate against future provocations without giving Pakistan time to respond with nukes (Dalton & Perkovich, 2016). Though India officially downplayed Cold Start, the concept influenced its force posture in subsequent years (e.g., reorganising strike corps for quick action).

A relatively quieter period followed until November 2008, when the Mumbai terror attacks (carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives from Pakistan) killed over 170 people. This outrage led to strong Indian demands for action, but India again refrained from military retaliation, partly due to a lack of clear military options and concern about nuclear escalation in the absence of a targeted plan (Ganguly, 2016). The restraint in 2008 was praised by some as responsible nuclear-era leadership, but it also emboldened those in India who felt that not responding militarily was undermining deterrence at the sub-conventional level. By the mid-2010s, India's patience was clearly wearing thin as smaller-scale Pakistan-linked attacks continued.

In September 2016, after terrorists attacked an Indian Army base at Uri in Kashmir (killing 19 soldiers), India for the first time publicly acknowledged conducting "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control. These were small-scale commando raids on alleged terrorist launch pads in Pakistan-controlled territory. Though limited, this marked a significant shift — India was willing to use force across the de facto border, calculating it could avoid full escalation. Pakistan denied that any major strike took place, which helped both sides save face and de-escalate. The event indicated that India was probing the lower rungs of the escalation ladder to restore some deterrence at the sub-conventional level (O'Donnell, 2019).

The most perilous episode since Kargil occurred in February 2019. A suicide bombing in Pulwama (Indian Kashmir), claimed by a Pakistan-based jihadist group, killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops. In retaliation, India carried out an airstrike on a Jaish-e-Mohammad camp deep in Pakistani territory (Balakot, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province). This

Balakot airstrike was unprecedented, the first intentional Indian attack on mainland Pakistani territory since 1971. India stated the strike was pre-emptive against terrorists and deliberately non-military (avoiding Pakistani army targets) to signal restraint. Pakistan nevertheless responded the next day with its own aerial mission, leading to an air duel in which an Indian fighter was shot down and its pilot captured (he was later released) (IISS, 2021). During this crisis, both governments issued veiled nuclear conflict warnings, and reports emerged that India put some missile units on alert (IISS, 2021). The crisis subsided within days, aided by diplomatic efforts and Pakistan's quick return of the pilot, but it vividly demonstrated how escalation can occur even when both sides claim to seek restraint. The Pulwama–Balakot crisis showed that India was willing to risk direct strikes under the nuclear shadow, and Pakistan was willing to retaliate conventionally, walking a fine line to avoid further escalation. Analysts noted that misperceptions – for example, initial Indian overestimation of strike success and Pakistani overconfidence in signalling – could have led to wider conflict by accident (IISS, 2021; O'Donnell, 2019). In hindsight, the crisis validated neither side's notion of easy control; rather, deterrence was held largely by luck and timely de-escalation, not by clear mutual understanding.

6. DETERRENCE STABILITY AND INSTABILITY IN SOUTHERN ASIA

Examining these episodes through the above framework reveals a nuanced picture of deterrence and stability in Southern Asia. At the strategic level, deterrence has been largely stable: neither India nor Pakistan has ever come close to deliberate use of nuclear weapons in conflict. Both have developed survivable arsenals (India now possesses a nuclear triad including land-based missiles, bombers, and a nuclear submarine; Pakistan has a robust land-based missile force and aircraft delivery and is developing sea-based options) (Kristensen & Korda, 2018). This mutually assured retaliation capability, along with global normative pressure (the "nuclear taboo"), has so far prevented any consideration of a nuclear first strike except as rhetorical bluster. The fact that even during intense crises like 1999 or 2019, escalation stopped short of major conventional conflict suggests a strong shared interest in avoiding crossing the nuclear threshold (Hagerty, 2020). In this sense, strategic stability – defined as the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first – has prevailed. Each side knows that initiating nuclear conflict would be nationally suicidal, thereby deterring rational decision-makers from that path.

However, beneath the nuclear threshold, instability persists. At the conventional level, deterrence has sometimes faltered or been bypassed. Pakistan's adventurism at Kargil showed a willingness to test India's resolve, and only a careful Indian military campaign (and international pressure) prevented escalation. In 2001–02, India's massive mobilisation did not coerce Pakistan into stopping support for terrorists, but it did bring the region close to conflict. These instances reveal a pattern: while nuclear weapons deter full-fledged conflict, they also constrain how the stronger state (India) can leverage its conventional superiority. Pakistan's implicit nuclear threats essentially neutralise India's advantage in a drawn-out conventional conflict, eroding traditional deterrence by punishment at the conventional level. This forced India to innovate strategies for limited conflict, though their effectiveness remains unproven and risky (Dalton & Perkovich, 2016). The 2019 Balakot strike was an example of such a strategy, aiming to punish and deter at the sub-conventional level without triggering a conventional or nuclear reprisal. The aftermath—Pakistan's measured counterstrike and swift de-escalation—suggested a tentative new norm could be emerging, where both sides exercise restraint to keep engagements very limited. Some analysts termed the situation a potential "new normal" in which India might respond militarily to terrorism but in a calibrated way, and Pakistan might absorb small blows without escalating to preserve peace (Rajagopalan, 2019). Whether this new pattern holds or deters future terror attacks is uncertain; indeed, the absence of major incidents since 2019 could indicate a deterrent effect or merely a pause.

At the sub-conventional level, true stability remains elusive. Pakistan's support for insurgent and terrorist networks is an ongoing security challenge that nuclear deterrence cannot directly address. India has tried to establish deterrence by denial (strengthening counterinsurgency, border fencing, and intelligence) and, more recently, deterrence by punishment through limited strikes. These measures may reduce the frequency or damage of attacks but have not completely stopped them. From Pakistan's viewpoint, these sub-conventional tactics are a tool to keep the Kashmir issue alive and bleed India at low cost, tempered only when the risk of Indian retaliation or international isolation grows too high (Ganguly, 2016). Thus, sub-conventional conflict persists in a grey zone: enough instability to strain relations and provoke crises, but usually calibrated to avoid pushing India over the edge. This delicate balance can be easily upset if either side miscalculates. For instance, a particularly lethal terrorist attack or a bold Indian strike in response could ignite a chain reaction. Each crisis carries a probability, however small, of inadvertent escalation, be it a skirmish escalation or a false alarm prompting nuclear alerts. Crisis stability in Southern Asia is therefore often described as precarious or "ugly

stability": stable in that conflict is averted, but ugly in that the path to conflict is cluttered with near misses and constant low-level violence (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010).

This analysis also highlights the crucial role of command and control and decision-making in maintaining deterrence stability. Pakistan's nuclear posture of asymmetric escalation means it has prepared for possible early use of nuclear weapons, including deployment of tactical nukes in the field. This raises concerns about delegation and control – if lower-level commanders have authority in the heat of battle, the risk of accidental or unauthorised use grows (Narang, 2014). During intense conflicts, the side under conventional pressure (likely Pakistan, given India's military) could face a "use it or lose it" dilemma regarding its nuclear arsenal (Clary & Narang, 2019). India's doctrine of massive retaliation (with a No First Use pledge) is meant to deter Pakistan from ever using even a tactical nuke by promising an annihilating response (Indian National Security Advisory Board, 2003). While this posture sounds grimly stabilising (threatening assured destruction to prevent any nuclear use), its credibility can be questioned – would India really risk national suicide over, say, a single low-yield weapon used on its forces in Pakistani territory? The tension between stated doctrine and plausible action adds ambiguity to deterrence. Some experts argue India might in reality opt for proportional retaliation, but ambiguity itself can be destabilising if misinterpreted.

Another factor tempering Indo-Pak escalation has been third-party mediation, primarily by the United States. During nearly every major crisis (1990, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2019), U.S. officials engaged in shuttle diplomacy and intense communications to defuse tensions (Yusuf, 2018). This outside intervention effectively served as a supplemental deterrent mechanism, not deterrence by threat, but deterrence by reassurance and pressure. Washington has often urged restraint while quietly assuring each side that it will hold the other accountable to commitments. In 2019, for example, the United States and other powers leaned on Pakistan to quickly release the captured Indian pilot and crack down on the terrorist group involved while cautioning India against further strikes. Such actions helped terminate the crisis. Moeed Yusuf (2018) argues that this pattern amounts to a "brokered" stability in South Asia, where the true mechanism of preventing conflict is not just bilateral deterrence but the shadow of US diplomatic influence. However, relying on third parties is risky, as their interests may shift, and in-the-moment intervention is not guaranteed. The enduring stability must ultimately come from the rivals themselves.

7. ARMS RACE AND THE FUTURE OF STABILITY

No analysis of strategic stability is complete without considering the evolving arms race in Southern Asia. Since 1998, India and Pakistan have steadily expanded and modernised their nuclear arsenals. As of 2022, each side is estimated to have on the order of 150–160 nuclear conflict heads (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2022). Both countries have diversified delivery systems: Pakistan has introduced battlefield-range ballistic missiles (Nasr) and medium-range missiles and is developing MIRV-capable missiles (like the Ababeel tested in 2017) to penetrate Indian missile defenses; India has developed a family of Agni ballistic missiles covering ranges up to intercontinental, deployed nuclear-capable aircraft, and commissioned nuclear submarines for a sea-based deterrent (Kristensen & Korda, 2018; Clary & Narang, 2019). India's pursuit of missile defence systems (including domestic programs and potentially foreign systems like Israel's Arrow or the S-400 from Russia) is of particular concern to Pakistan, as it fears its nuclear deterrent could be blunted. These qualitative improvements point to a "race" not necessarily in sheer numbers (where growth is relatively slow) but in capabilities – more accurate missiles, faster launch procedures, greater surveillance, and possibly integration of new technologies such as cyber and space assets (Sethi, 2022).

How will this arms competition affect stability? One view is that as both countries achieve more secure second-strike forces (e.g., mobile missiles and submarine-based warheads), strategic stability will improve because the deterrent becomes invulnerable and hence removes any temptation for a first strike by the adversary (Sigal, 1985). There is some evidence of this: India's commissioning of its Arihant nuclear submarine and Pakistan's development of solid-fuel Shaheen missiles contribute to assured retaliation. However, an opposing concern is that certain developments could undermine stability by lowering the nuclear threshold or spurring pre-emption fears. Tactical nukes in the field could be captured or used in a heated battle; MIRVs and missile defenses create uncertainty about each side's ability to absorb an attack and still retaliate, possibly rekindling "use it first or lose it" mentalities (Clary & Narang, 2019). If, for instance, India believed it could launch a counterforce strike to eliminate most Pakistani nukes (a scenario some analysts discuss given India's improving reconnaissance and precision capabilities), it might embolden hawks in New Delhi and alarm Islamabad into a hair-trigger posture. Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang (2019) argue that India's consideration of

counterforce options – what they term "counterforce temptations" – could destabilise deterrence by making nuclear conflict thinkable, in turn prompting Pakistan to further delegate launch authority or adopt launch-on-warning postures. Such shifts would drastically shorten decision times in a crisis, increasing the probability of accidental or hasty nuclear use.

Additionally, the China factor looms: China's nuclear expansion (now estimated at 500 warheads and growing) and advanced technologies put pressure on India to keep up, which trickles down pressure to Pakistan (O'Donnell, 2019). The triangular security dilemma means Southern Asia's stability is tied into the broader Asian nuclear balance. If China's buildup erodes India's sense of security, India may divert resources to its China front or seek capabilities (like MIRVs) that incidentally also affect Pakistan. Pakistan, with fewer resources, may feel compelled to compensate asymmetrically (perhaps by leaning even more on nuclear weapons). This deterrence trilemma could make maintaining equilibrium even more challenging (Dalton & Krepon, 2015).

In short, the future of strategic stability in Southern Asia will depend on how both India and Pakistan manage their deterrence relationship amid these technological and geopolitical shifts. Will they fall into an action-reaction spiral of nuclear competition, or can they stabilise it through agreements and restraint? History shows that even bitter Cold War adversaries eventually pursued arms control to bolster stability (e.g., U.S.–USSR treaties on missile defenses and intermediate-range missiles). So far, India and Pakistan have very limited arms control or risk-reduction measures. They have some basic Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) – for example, agreements on prior notification of missile tests and on not attacking each other's nuclear facilities, and a hotline between their Directors General of Military Operations (Chari, 2004). These CBMs have utility in preventing accidental escalation and miscommunication. During crises, however, direct dialogue has often broken down, and political relations have been too fraught to build more robust mechanisms.

Given this context, analysis indicates that without improvements in the sub-conventional realm, strategic stability will remain tenuous. Deterrence alone is a blunt instrument for dealing with proxy war and terror attacks. Both sides would benefit from exploring avenues to address the root causes of sub-conventional conflict (notably the Kashmir dispute and jihadist networks) through diplomacy. Even incremental progress or tacit understandings—such as Pakistan curbing terrorist infiltrations in exchange for India restraining aggressive doctrines—could reduce the frequency of crises. Strengthening nuclear risk-reduction measures is equally important: regular communication between political and military leaders, nuclear launch notification agreements, and perhaps a revival of talks on limiting certain destabilising weapons (like tactical nukes or short-range missiles) could contribute to stability (Khan, 2018). The interplay of deterrence and sub-conventional conflict means any step that lowers hostility at the low end has spillover benefits for the high end.

8. CONCLUSION

Southern Asia's experience over the past few decades vividly demonstrates the simultaneous coexistence of deterrence-driven stability and conflict-driven instability. On one level, nuclear weapons have achieved their intended effect: India and Pakistan have not fought a major conflict since acquiring them, and both states remain acutely aware that any direct clash risks unimaginable devastation. This strategic stability – fragile but real – has likely saved countless lives by averting another all-out Indo-Pakistani conflict. However, this stability has come at the cost of persistent low-level conflict and recurrent crises that keep the region far from true peace. The presence of nuclear deterrence has channelled the rivalry into sub-conventional and hybrid warfare realms, as Pakistan continues to pursue revisionist goals under the nuclear umbrella and India grapples with response options that won't trigger nuclear escalation (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). The net result is a precarious equilibrium often characterised as the stability–instability paradox: peace at the macro level, violence at the micro level.

Our analysis, using a multi-level framework, finds that the deterrence relationship in Southern Asia is neither completely stable nor dangerously unstable but rather contingent – it oscillates between stability and instability depending on how crises are managed. In recent crises like Kargil and Balakot, we see evidence that deterrence can hold – leaders pulled back from the brink each time – yet the fact that those crises occurred at all and escalated to the points they did shows that deterrence is not foolproof. Indeed, misjudgments or domestic political pressures could in the future produce an escalatory spiral that would test the nuclear threshold more severely. It is sobering that each crisis has relied

in part on improvisation and third-party intervention to avert disaster; such luck cannot be assumed indefinitely (Yusuf, 2018; IISS, 2021).

In conclusion, Southern Asia sits at the crossroads of deterrence and provocation. The region has so far avoided the nightmare of nuclear conflict, but it has not escaped the shadow of conflict. Nuclear deterrence has provided a form of negative peace – the absence of full-scale conflict – without resolving underlying disputes. Strategic stability, therefore, exists in a qualified sense: it holds, but only as long as each crisis is carefully managed. The India-Pakistan case affirms the sobering truth that while nuclear weapons may deter conflict, they do not by themselves create peace. It falls upon policymakers in New Delhi and Islamabad to recognise that sustaining stability will require proactive risk reduction and conflict resolution initiatives. Confidence-building measures, robust communication during crises, and steps to curtail the frequency of sub-conventional attacks are essential safeguards. As the nuclear capabilities on both sides continue to grow, the margin for error shrinks, making it ever more imperative that both nations move beyond the dangerous logic of the stability-instability paradox and create a more stable and peaceful Southern Asian security architecture.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (1999). Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program: Turning Points and Nuclear Choices. International Security, 23(4), 178–204. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539298 Accessed 22 Apr. 2019.

Brodie, B. (1946). The absolute weapon: Atomic power and world order (p. 76). New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Chakma, B. (2005). Toward Pokhran II: Explaining India's nuclearisation process. Modern Asian Studies, 39(1), 189–236. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/12740144.pdf

Chari, P. R. (2004). Nuclear CBMs between India and Pakistan (Issue Brief No. 24). New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.

Clary, C., & Narang, V. (2019). India's counterforce temptations: Strategic dilemmas, doctrine, and capabilities. International Security, 43(3), 7–52. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340 Accessed 17 September 2019.

Dalton, T., & Perkovich, G. (2016). India's nuclear options and escalation dominance. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/nuclear-policy/proliferation-news/indias-nuclear-options-and-escalation-dominance?lang=en Accessed 13 August 2019.

Dixit, K. C. (2010). Sub-conventional Warfare: Requirements, Impact and Way Ahead. Journal of Defence Studies, 4(1), 120–134. https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_4_1_kcdixit.pdf Accessed 14 June 2019.

Ganguly, S., & Kapur, S. P. (2010). India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia. New York: Columbia University Press. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/book/cup/0018564/f_0018564_15890.pdf Accessed 4 October 2019.

Ganguly, S. (2016). India's restrained response to the Mumbai attacks: The prospects for stable deterrence in South Asia. International Security, 39(3), 93–107.

Hagerty, D. T. (2020). Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2021). Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities (Research Paper). London: IISS. https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2021/05/nuclear-deterrence-south-asia/ Accessed 4 October 2021.

Kapur, S. P. (2005). India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia is not like Cold Conflict Europe. International Security, 30(2), 127–152.

Kapur, S. P. (2008). Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Khan, F. H. (2018). Confidence-building measures in South Asia: The nuclear dimension. In M. Krepon (Ed.), Off Ramps from Confrontation in Southern Asia (pp. 21–38). Washington, DC: Stimson Centre. https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/OffRamps_Book_R5_WEB.pdf

Kristensen, H. M., & Korda, M. (2018). Indian nuclear forces, 2018. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 74(6), 361–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1533162 Accessed 16 October 2019.

Morgan, P. M. (2003). Deterrence Now. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Narang, V. (2014). Nuclear strategy in the modern era: Regional powers and international conflict. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

O'Donnell, F. (2019). India's Nuclear Counter-Revolution: Nuclear Learning and the Future of Deterrence. The Nonproliferation Review, 26(5–6), 407–428. https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2019.1715018 Accessed 09 September 2019.

Sigal, L. V. (1985). Stability and Instability in Nuclear Deterrence. Journal of Peace Research, 22(1), 1–11.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (2022). SIPRI Yearbook 2022: Armaments, disarmament and international security (pp. 333–336). Oxford University Press. https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2022

Snyder, G. H. (1961). Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security (p. 21). Princeton University Press.

Watterson, C. J. (2017). Competing interpretations of the stability–instability paradox: The case of the Kargil Conflict. The Nonproliferation Review, 24(1–2), 83–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2017.1366623 Accessed 09 September 2020.

Yusuf, M. (2018). Brokering peace in nuclear environments: U.S. crisis management in South Asia. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.