

South Asia under the nuclear shadow

Is stable nuclear deterrence feasible?



Rodney W. Jones says the tenability of the view that existential deterrence can work in a nuclearised South Asia is at best dubious

Ejaz Haider's article on how Pakistan's deterrence policies fared against the military confrontation India launched—after Muslim extremists attacked India's parliament last December 13 — is courageous, far-reaching, and insightful. (See "Stable deterrence and flawed Pakistani nuclear strategy," TFT, February 8-14, 2002) His views on deterrence stability deserve a thoughtful discussion, with what we know of Indian and Pakistani nuclear and military capabilities.

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Haider is most persuasive when he critically dissects the view that Pakistan's nuclear "deterrence failed" because Islamabad seemingly caved in to Indian pressure to defuse the confrontation. That view, according to Haider, was as follows:

"Pakistan's nuclear tests were supposed to have given it a strategic parity with India, compensating for major asymmetries between the two. The 'equality of destructive power' was supposed to keep India at bay. But if India is prepared for a war and has made Islamabad blink, then deterrence, obviously, has failed."

Haider explained his problems with that view: (1) Deterrence failure or success must not be judged by a single episode but rather on the cumulative results of crisis interaction. (2) Failure in this case had less to do with deterrence than what Haider labeled as "Islamabad's flawed nuclear strategy." (3) How stable deterrence is, he says, depends on

multiple factors embedded in the rival states or their regional context—such as the degree of status quo or revisionist orientation, geography, domestic harmony, external alliances, etc. (4) Haider added, optimistically, that “the present military build-up on both sides, far from signaling deterrence failure, is likely to go a long way in stabilizing the deterrence relationship between India and Pakistan.”

Central to his critique is Haider’s thesis that Pakistan’s nuclear strategy is flawed. Pakistan’s strategy, he argued, is analogous to NATO’s reliance on nuclear weapons and the nuclear first use option to deter surprise attack by heavier Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional forces, compensating for Western Europe’s narrow geography. Similarly, Pakistan faces India’s military superiority with little strategic depth, and compensates with nuclear weapons—retaining, like NATO, the option of nuclear first use.

The difference Haider noted is that NATO was the status quo power against the Soviet challenge, while in the India-Pakistan case it is Pakistan that challenges the status quo, contesting India’s possession of Jammu and Kashmir. Haider believes Pakistan seeks to use nuclear deterrence (or the threat of escalation to nuclear use) to support a “forward strategy” over Kashmir. This strategy aims to neutralize Indian conventional military options while pursuing a low-intensity form of warfare to dislodge Kashmir from India’s grasp. The effect is a lowering of the nuclear threshold (higher risk of nuclear war) so as to confine India’s military response to conflict on Pakistani terms.

A flaw in the strategy became apparent, Haider argued, when India challenged this logic, as it did after Kargil and again this winter, by mobilizing the potential for an all-out conventional war against Pakistan, to include a blockade of Pakistan’s access to the sea. By demonstrating this threat of overwhelming conventional force, India countered Pakistan’s freedom to use low-intensity warfare and extracted Pakistani commitments to stand down.

Haider showed that Pakistan’s current nuclear capability did not deter either from mounting a confrontation or from employing it for coercive diplomatic aims. India’s success was amplified by its embrace of the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism after the events of September 11, a factor absent during Kargil. Pakistan’s own commitment to that anti-terrorist coalition dictated its measured and conciliatory response to India’s military pressure.

Not all questions raised by Haider’s analysis, however, were satisfactorily resolved.

Is it correct to say that Pakistan's "forward strategy" (a foreign policy that seeks to change the status quo in Kashmir) is really part and parcel of a *nuclear* strategy, with deterrence as its focal point? What objectives are plausible for Pakistani *nuclear deterrence* ? Is it reasonable to expect that Pakistani nuclear capability would *deter* Indian conventional *threats* ? Is stable nuclear deterrence *feasible* in the current context of conventional military imbalance in the subcontinent?

Will the lessons from this last confrontation actually take India and Pakistan up a deterrence learning curve that curbs challenges to the status quo and stabilizes the military relationship? Are there any foreseeable conditions under which these nuclear-armed states will lose their taste for warlike confrontation with each other? Will rational nuclear deterrence calculations withstand or crumble under the campaign against international terrorism?

On the question of what objectives are plausible for Pakistani *nuclear deterrence* , Haider cites the recent Italian report based on conversations held with Pakistani experts and officials in Islamabad (*Nuclear safety, nuclear stability and nuclear strategy in Pakistan* , A concise report of a visit by Landau Network - Centro Volta, January 2002).

General Khalid Kidwai's reported remarks and his delineation of nuclear-triggering scenarios are instructive. In view of Kidwai's position as chief of the Strategic Plans Division in Pakistan's nuclear command and control system, incidentally, one must assume his briefing sets forth publicly for the first time in a coherent framework Pakistan's nuclear posture, strategy, and doctrine:

General Kidwai told the Italians that Pakistani nuclear weapons are aimed "solely at India" and "will be used only 'if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake.'" This suggests Pakistan has adopted a "last resort" policy of nuclear use—or nuclear use only *in extremis* . Kidwai disclaimed any interest on Pakistan's part in adopting battlefield (artillery) nuclear weapons, ruling out in Pakistan's posture against India what would be considered "tactical nuclear weapons" — in noteworthy contrast to NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War.

Kidwai enumerated four Indian triggering scenarios of deterrence failure that would (or could) lead to Pakistani nuclear retaliation:

"(a) India attacks Pakistan and conquers a large part of its territory (space threshold);

(b) India destroys a large part either of [Pakistan's] land or air forces (military threshold);

(c) India proceeds to the economic strangling of Pakistan (economic strangling);

(d) India pushes Pakistan into political destabilization or creates a large scale internal subversion in Pakistan (domestic destabilization).”

Although the military context of the last scenario is vague, the first three unmistakably imply that Indian conventional military aggression that puts Pakistan’s existence in jeopardy will force Pakistan to launch a strategic nuclear reprisal.

This outline of Pakistan’s nuclear deterrence posture is an entirely credible statement of nuclear deterrence strategy, proportioned to Pakistan’s military capabilities and overall security situation. It reserves nuclear use solely as a response to aggression by India—whether conventional or nuclear—and then only if the Indian aggression (presumably conventional) threatens Pakistan’s independent existence.

Kidwai’s statement contains no hint of vital “forward” objectives, offers no nuclear umbrella to regional neighbors, and places no tactical nuclear rungs low down in the India-Pakistan nuclear escalation ladder. It begs the questions, of course, how Pakistan’s operational nuclear assets may influence interaction with India during a confrontation or whether low-intensity operations by either side are made easier by the nuclear shadow. But it contains no promise that Pakistan’s nuclear deterrence can prevent Indian military brinkmanship or related political gains.

In this regard, the *gymkhana* (country club) view Haider ascribed to certain Pakistanis earlier—the expectation that Pakistan’s 1998 nuclear tests signified Pakistan’s immunity from Indian conventional military confrontation—was either naive or misled. One wonders whether this *gymkhana* view—which also prevailed among Indian civilian experts who have wishfully reassured Westerners since 1998 of India’s responsibility with nuclear weapons—was merely a mirror image of Western neo-liberal thinking on the existential quality of nuclear deterrence. Many in that school of thought came to believe that only a few nukes were needed to deter aggression, even if they were non-weaponized. The tenability of that view was always dubious for a nuclearized South Asia, and the conventional military confrontations of mid-1999 and January-February 2002 plainly contradicted it.

But Haider in his own view also seems to expect that “nuclear stability” will materialize over time on a learning curve ingrained by crisis interaction with India. He may be right that India will back off and accommodate a stable nuclear-armed bilateralism—provided Pakistan resigns from its

claims on Kashmir. For India to embrace this resignation enthusiastically, it would also have to void Musharraf's constructive shift in policy over a year ago that would give Kashmiris not only a voice but perhaps a determining role in deciding Kashmir's future. Theoretically at least, this latest Pakistani position seems open to full Kashmiri independence, formerly anathema to both sides.

Short of a Pakistani surrender on Kashmir and metamorphosis into a status quo state, however, stable Pakistani nuclear deterrence against conventional Indian aggression is unattainable today—for technical reasons. It will not be attainable until and unless Pakistan obtains secure (survivable) second-strike nuclear capabilities. Only then might Pakistan have the luxury of choosing to declare a nuclear no-first-use policy. Only then would India recognize through hard-nosed military and intelligence assessments that it would be suicidal to threaten Pakistan with a major conventional war. Only then would one be more confident that the residual political crises between India and Pakistan would lead to benign validating Haider's nuclear stability learning curve. Otherwise, mastering crisis instability may prove infeasible in this relationship.

Pakistan's existing nuclear assets probably provide sufficient existential deterrence against a *surprise nuclear* attack on Pakistan—akin to denial of the familiar “bolt out of the blue” scenario. It is hard to imagine India contemplating a preemptive *nuclear* strike against Pakistan out of the blue, with one exception. A senior Indian military official recently alluded to striking Pakistan with nuclear weapons in the event Pakistan used nuclear weapons on Indian forces even on Pakistani soil. This could open the door to seriously considering preemptive nuclear options.

India, however, is believed to be exploring operational concepts and means for *conventional* preemption of Pakistan's still less than fully deployed nuclear forces, e.g., by surgical air strikes or commando operations. President Musharraf alluded to this in his September 19, 2001 speech, when he underscored the need to protect Pakistan's nuclear assets.

It is not obvious that Pakistan's existential nuclear deterrence can neutralize that Indian planning or future potential. But it is doubtful that India's operational planners have high confidence in the ability of any solely Indian operation to preempt Pakistan's nuclear assets by conventional means.

In South Asia's nuclear-shadowed military arena today, the new global campaign against Al Qaeda and international terrorism adds more pressure to Pakistan's conventional defense posture and weakens

Pakistan's traditional capacity to maintain robust conventional deterrence. India's conventional force modernization has proceeded apace with little inhibition other than economic constraints. In contrast, Pakistan's conventional force modernization lags dangerously, especially in aircraft reequipment, air defense, naval capacity, integrated operations, situational awareness, and early warning.

These imbalances can only be remedied by commensurate force reductions in India, painful acquisition efforts in Pakistan, or allies joining Pakistan to add weight to its side of the balance. Absent these possibilities and acknowledging Pakistan's natural geographical limitations, the worsening imbalances make conventional military confrontations with India both more likely and more dangerous. This is what is hard to square with Haider's optimism about crises moving both countries incrementally up the nuclear stability learning curve.

The nuclear threshold has been driven down not so much by Pakistan's experimentation with low-intensity warfare across the line of control in Kashmir as by nearly twenty years of starkly unequal arms acquisition trends, and by India's readiness to exploit its huge buildup politically by coercive diplomacy. This situation is only the more explosive when Pakistan's defense establishment is dedicating attention and forces to support US operations in Afghanistan, and expending political capital to repress native Muslim extremist groups domestically.

Just as the extremist attack on India's parliament on December 13 aroused India to concentrate forces on Pakistan's border, another such extremist Muslim attack—especially one that slays prominent Indian officials in Delhi—would almost certainly ignite war at some level. An Indian origin rogue operation in Islamabad could achieve a similar but reciprocal effect. If that war escalated uncontrollably due to an outpouring of popular rage or to gross operational miscalculations and crossed Pakistan's red lines, the odds of the conflict ending in a nuclear exchange would be high—far higher, needless to say, than anywhere else in the world today.

Existential nuclear deterrents in this context are inherently unstable. It goes without saying that any serious war gaming or simulation of these conditions would make this patently clear. This has been recognized analytically in the United States but, surprisingly, measures designed to stabilize the nuclear relationship have yet to be mentioned, let alone ventured.

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primary author of Tracking Nuclear Proliferation: A Guide in Maps and Charts (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998). The views expressed here are solely his own and do not reflect those of any institution. He wrote this article exclusively for TFT.

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