



National Security Journal

<http://nationalsecurityjournal.nz>

Published by:
Centre for Defence
and Security Studies,
Massey University

ISSN: 2703-1926 (print) ISSN: 2703-1934 (online)

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To cite this article: Brewster D. (2021). The South Asia Stability-Instability Paradox Under the Nuclear Shadow. *National Security Journal*. Published 09 December 2021.
doi:[10.36878/nsj20211209.02](https://doi.org/10.36878/nsj20211209.02)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.36878/nsj20211209.02>

View CrossRef data: <https://search.crossref.org/?q=10.36878%2Fnsj20211209.02>

THE SOUTH ASIA STABILITY-INSTABILITY PARADOX UNDER THE NUCLEAR SHADOW

David Brewster¹

Cross-border clashes between India and Pakistan in 2019, and between India and China in 2020, have placed a spotlight on theories about the stabilising and destabilising effects of nuclear weapons. The experience of the India-Pakistan dyad, and now that within the India-China dyad, is that despite the apparent risks of nuclear escalation, nuclear-armed adversaries may still be prepared to engage in limited, but deadly conventional or sub-conventional conflicts under the nuclear shadow. This paper uses stability-instability paradox theory to explain the mechanics of this apparent paradox and to discuss how these relationships may evolve in future.

Key Words: nuclear deterrence, South Asia, stability-instability paradox

Introduction

Recent conflicts between nuclear powers in South Asia, including cross-border clashes between India and Pakistan in 2019 and between India and China in 2020, have placed a spotlight on theories about the stabilising and destabilising effects of nuclear weapons. These theories reflect popular assumptions about the stabilising effects of nuclear weapons drawn from the Cold War dynamics between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States. During this period, many policymakers and scholars grew accustomed to the view that nuclear-armed adversaries would go to great lengths to avoid direct conventional military provocation for fear of escalation to a nuclear exchange. Questions remain, however, as to whether this remains the case and to what extent such assumptions may be applied to the nuclear dyads in South Asia, namely India-Pakistan and China-India.

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In answering these questions, the stability-instability paradox theory is a useful framework. In broad terms, the theory posits that when two countries possess nuclear weapons, the probability of a direct war between them greatly decreases, but the probability of minor or indirect conflicts between them increases. This theory is often associated with the Cold War nuclear strategist, Glenn Snyder, who argued that the fear of mutually assured destruction (MAD) could create a form of stability at a strategic level to that witnessed during the Cold War.¹ Conversely, he also argued that nuclear weapons could simultaneously create instability by enabling lower levels of violence that do not rise up the escalatory ladder to the nuclear threshold. In the case of the USSR and the United States, this took the shape of numerous proxy wars throughout the globe, but never in a direct conventional conflict between the two countries.

In other words, by creating a nuclear ceiling that both sides do not wish to breach, there is space for conflict beneath that ceiling. The size of that space is dependent upon the countries involved. In the years that followed, Robert Jervis provided additional insights stemming from dynamics between challengers and status quo powers.² He argued that challengers would be much more likely to engage in risk taking, including the use of asymmetrical strategies against status quo powers. Utilising—and in some cases challenging—this theoretical framework, this essay will explore symmetrical and asymmetrical conflict in South Asia under the shadow of nuclear weapons. It focuses on how conventional and non-conventional conflict has developed over the last two decades in the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad, followed by a preliminary discussion of some of the risks of such conflict developing in the India-China nuclear dyad in the future.

India-Pakistan: The 1999 Kargil Conflict

The conflict between India and Pakistan, particularly along the Line of Control (LOC), which separates the military forces of Pakistan and India in Kashmir, is often cited as an example of the stability-instability paradox.³ Among the various incidents at the LOC, there has been a considerable focus on the 1999 Kargil conflict, which occurred only months after both India and Pakistan became declared nuclear-armed states. An examination of the details of this conflict and its aftermath provides some clues about how each side sought to achieve their objectives, while ensuring the conflict remained beneath the nuclear threshold.

In February 1999, the Pakistan Army deployed 5,000 troops and paramilitaries. These thinly-disguised irregulars were to occupy positions on the Indian side of the LOC, thereby establishing bases on the vantage points of the Indian-controlled region.⁴ The Indian government responded to these intrusions by mobilising 200,000 Indian troops, though subsequent fighting was conducted mostly at the regimental or battalion level.⁵ In effect, under support from the Indian Air Force, India deployed two divisions numbering 20,000 of the Indian Army, in addition to several thousand paramilitaries in the conflict zone.

These manoeuvres indicated a clear decision by the Indian government to respond forcefully and to keep the conflict contained. While the Indian Army suffered high casualties over the two month-period of attacking uphill against fortified Pakistani positions, the much larger Indian forces ultimately pushed back Pakistan troops over the LOC. In the end, Pakistan suffered at least 700 fatalities, with India losing at least 522 soldiers.⁶

Despite these losses, the conflict was not accompanied by significant escalation by India or Pakistan elsewhere along the LOC or the international border. Furthermore, the Pakistan Air Force was not deployed in the conflict. And, while the Indian Air Force mobilised against Pakistan positions on the Indian side of the LOC, it was not permitted to cross the LOC. Nevertheless, there was a degree of horizontal escalation by the Indian Navy that implicitly deployed ships to threaten Pakistan's trade blockade.

According to Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst and counter-terrorism expert, Pakistan began preparing nuclear weapons for deployment and possible use during these events in 1999.⁷ Thinly veiled nuclear threats also formed part of Pakistan government rhetoric. Still, Kargil could be considered as a 'staircase' or 'ladder' crisis in which the level of escalation is relatively controllable by leadership on both sides. Overall, the Kargil conflict provided clear evidence of the propensity of new nuclear states, particularly those in South Asia, for risk-taking under the nuclear shadow, even up to the level of significant conflict by conventional forces.

India-Pakistan: Uri, Pulwama and Balakot

The outcome of the Kargil conflict provided lessons to Pakistan about the efficacy of conducting conventional conflicts along the LOC. Since 1999, there have been many incidents of sub-conventional conflict at the LOC between India and Pakistan, mostly stemming from actions initiated by Pakistan as part of an overall asymmetric strategy that includes support for terrorism and insurgencies.⁸ These incidents provide further data points for the potential motivations behind and limits to conflicts under the nuclear shadow.

Among these, Indian ground forces conducted a so-called 2016 'surgical strike' against extremist groups based in Pakistani Kashmir, following an allegedly Pakistan-supported terrorist attack at Uri that killed 19 Indian troops.⁹ Claims about this strike were an important step in publicly signalling India's willingness to retaliate following large-scale terrorist incidents. More recently, in 2019, this confrontation resumed following the suicide bombing of an Indian military convoy at Pulwama in Indian Kashmir, which killed 40 Indian paramilitary police. The Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed—which operates training camps in Pakistan with the complicity, if not support, of the Pakistan security apparatus—claimed responsibility.¹⁰

It is commonly thought that the Pulwama attack was timed to put pressure on India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the run up to India's elections.¹¹ While it remains unclear as to whether the attack was expressly sanctioned by Pakistan's government, the scale and timing of the attack were presumably intended to force Modi to retaliate with a substantial attack against Pakistan. In turn, Modi responded by ordering the Indian Air Force to conduct an air strike over the international border to bomb a terrorist camp near Balakot in Pakistan. Indian sources claimed that the air strike killed hundreds of terrorists, but other credible reports indicated that the air-launched missiles missed their target entirely.¹²

In spite of the considerable nationalist rhetoric that ensued, however, there were no significant moves on either side to deploy nuclear weapons. Instead, Pakistan responded with air attacks against Indian military facilities in Kashmir, which caused no casualties—perhaps intentionally so to avoid escalation.¹³ After a subsequent air battle between the Indian and Pakistani Air Force, which resulted in the loss of two Indian aircraft and capture of an Indian pilot, Pakistan's government returned the pilot to India in a gesture of goodwill, effectively interrupting the action-reaction pattern set in motion by preceding events.¹⁴

In the wake of the Kargil conflict, the events in Uri, Pulwama and Balakot provide useful insights into activities conducted beneath the nuclear threshold in South Asia. Among these, both incidents indicate India's increased preparedness to use ground and air forces against non-state actors allegedly supported by Pakistan's state in response to large-scale terrorist attacks. However, some analysts are pessimistic about the relationship. For example, they claim that chance played a major role in ameliorating the Pulwama and Balkakot crisis, and that disparities in India's and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines give rise to the risk and real possibility of miscalculation.¹⁵

However, while both these crises suggest a perceived need by Pakistan to demonstrate a 'forceful' response to Indian actions publicly—though perhaps not the use of deadly force—the two sides appeared ready to negotiate de-escalatory crisis 'off ramps' when the opportunities occurred. Throughout, these conflicts involved action-reaction patterns under the nuclear shadow. Nonetheless, both India and Pakistan appear to have demonstrated the ability to evolve new patterns of behaviour that allowed them to use force, without escalation.

India-China: Conflicts Under the Nuclear Shadow?

Beyond the evolution occurring in India-Pakistan dynamics, a significant turning point in nuclear dynamics in South Asia may be emerging. The recent conflict between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas could represent the first step towards the stability-instability paradox allowing a sustained and deadly conflict between these two nuclear-armed states.

Following the 1959 Tibetan uprising and India's 1960 Forward Policy, India and China engaged in border skirmishes that resulted in a major border conflict in 1962. Yet, since the late 1960s, while regular border incidents and claimed territorial violations continue on both sides, there had been no combat fatalities. This was likely due, in part, to a series of agreements on confidence building measures in 1993, 1996 and 2013.¹⁶

However, the events at the Galwan Valley in Ladakh in June 2020 represented a significant change to this status quo. In the lead up to those incidents, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and to a lesser extent the Indian Army, actively pushed forward in establishing new posts in this disputed territory.¹⁷ A non-kinetic attack by Indian troops on a newly built Chinese outpost was met with a forceful and deadly response when an estimated 20 Indian troops were bludgeoned to death with clubs and rocks, with the PLA reportedly suffering 35 deaths.¹⁸

Since July 2020, Indian and Chinese governments engaged in negotiations to disengage forces along the LAC, with scattered reports of an uptick in PLA activity. Only by February 2021 did these talks yield agreements by both sides to disengage, which were partially implemented in the following months.¹⁹ While heartening in terms of crisis management, the preceding violent exchange between two nuclear-armed countries in 2020 poses the question of whether the events in the Galwan Valley could have marked the first step in the stability-instability paradox in the Sino-Indian nuclear dyad. The extent of casualties suffered on both sides indicates a possible shift in previous behaviour.

While it is possible that the incident was the result of miscalculations by local commanders, some Indian and Western experts contend that the Chinese actions prior to and during the clash was not just a local miscalculation.²⁰ It is not clear what drove the PLA's deadly actions—whether it was part of an overall increase in regional assertiveness by China in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis or whether there were more specific drivers such as local road building activities by India or the removal of Ladakh's limited autonomy under the Indian Constitution.²¹ This makes it difficult to predict whether there will be a renewal of the conflict at a later date or a different location along the LAC. Nevertheless, three key indications from the Indian side suggest an increased probability of further conflict.

First, there has been a significant build-up of Indian conventional forces in both the western and eastern Himalayas, including artillery and air forces.²² Second, there has been a withdrawal by Indian military command of previous restrictions on use of firearms by local commanders.²³ Third, an increase of naval activity has ensued, along with talk of the potential value of horizontal escalation into the Indian Ocean, where the Indian Navy holds a considerable strategic advantage over the PLA Navy.²⁴ This could include future threats of interdiction of Chinese trade in the northern Indian Ocean.

At the same time, there have been indications of Indian efforts towards de-escalation. In the immediate period following the crisis, the Modi government rhetoric on China was been relatively measured, in contrast with the Pulwama incident with Pakistan in 2019. This included vagueness on whether PLA troops were present on Indian territory and emphasis on the potential for a negotiated solution trying to restore the status quo ante.²⁵ Some of these statements probably contributed to the conditions leading to the 2021 disengagement at the border.

Nevertheless, these de-escalatory signals from India were also met with the PLA pressing on multiple locations in Ladakh and in the east in Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore, even after the beginning of the disengagement process, activities of both sides indicated that their conflicts have the potential for greater horizontal escalation, spreading to air and even sea. As a result, there continue to be ‘multiple windows of opportunity at a tactical level’ for further clashes.²⁶

Future fatal clashes could move the China-India strategic relationship in the Himalayas towards using asymmetric strategies or continuing action-reaction dynamics under the nuclear shadow. The operation of the stability-instability paradox in the China-India relationship could also extend well beyond the Himalayas. Strategic competition between the two countries is increasingly extending across the Indian Ocean and into the South China Sea, including considerable jostling for political and strategic influence in smaller countries in the region.

If this trend worsens, there could ultimately be potential for proxy conflicts, analogous to proxy conflicts between the USSR and the United States during the Cold War. The two countries could, for example, be drawn into and exacerbate civil conflicts in third countries where each compete for political influence or access to resources. Involvement in proxy conflicts elsewhere in the region could then reverberate back into increased tensions in the Himalayas and result in further low-level conflicts under the nuclear shadow. As we have seen on the India-Pakistan LOC, there seems to be substantial room for conventional or asymmetric conflicts to occur between India and China at the LAC.

Conclusion

Examining border conflicts between India Pakistan following their declaration as nuclear weapons states in 1998 and between India and China in the Galwan Valley in 2020 appears to validate the stability-instability paradox theory in demonstrating that conventional and non-conventional conflicts between nuclear-armed states are possible. However, unlike the Cold War experience between the United States and the USSR, the India-Pakistan and India-China nuclear dyads appear relatively less constrained in pursuing direct conflicts involving a significant loss of life.

Nevertheless, there appears to have been meaningful efforts to avoid escalation in the India-Pakistan and India-China nuclear dyads. The experience of the India-Pakistan dyad shows an evolution of behaviour on both sides. Since 1999, Pakistan has moved towards less conventional and more asymmetric forms of conflict with India. However, in recent years, India seems to be moving towards taking more assertive and conventional responses to Pakistan. Further, the 2020 border clash between India and China demonstrates that they too are now willing to engage in conventional, if limited, conflict under the nuclear shadow.

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