

NUCLEAR SIGNALING IN SOUTH ASIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The United States and the Soviet Union released nuclear threats by giving statements and sometimes by installing nuclear weapons on missiles during the Cold War period. The nuclear signaling from the two countries effectively stopped the full-fledged war and forced them to involve in Cold War. The same is the story of South Asia, where India and Pakistan fought three major wars before the nuclearization of the two countries within the first twenty-five years of its independence. After the nuclearization of India and Pakistan, no full-fledged or even limited war has been experienced, and the real contribution goes to nuclear deterrence. The nuclear threats released from the two countries averted war in the region between 1987 and 2019. This research uses qualitative methodology with enriched data collected through semi-structured interviews from expert informants. Furthermore, this research uses Realist Theory and Thematic Analysis.

Key Words: India, Pakistan, deterrence, balance of terror, nuclear signaling, crises, war

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear signaling is part of the broader concept of nuclear deterrence from the deterrence theory. The United States (US) and the USSR released deterrence signals during the Cold War era and it worked effectively to avert direct confrontation between the two. The nuclear signaling first time emerged on screen in South Asia in 1987 when India started Brasstacks military exercises at the end of 1986 intending to go after Pakistan. After that, the series of crisis between the two countries initiated and both released the deterrence signals. The exercise of deterring with nuclear weapons during Indo Pak crises continued until 2019. The nuclear deterrence effectively stopped India from pursuing the path of war against Pakistan.

NUCLEAR SIGNALING IN SOUTH ASIA

India and Pakistan tested their nuclear weapons in May, 1998 and declared themselves as overt nuclear powers. According to Cheema (2004, 4), both states had the capability to assemble nuclear weapons in 1980s. Pakistan started signaling with statements in 1984 and later in 1987 during Brasstacks crisis from A.Q. Khan as stressed by Chari (2013), "One of the most discussed instances of nuclear signaling in South Asia occurred during crisis sparked by 1986-87 military exercise known as Operation Brasstacks."

Indo Pak Crises 1986-87 and 1990

India started conducting large military exercises named "Brasstacks" by the end of 1986, which continued till early 1987 in Rajasthan, near Pakistan's province of Sindh. Indian military seemed

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willing to start a new front against Pakistan. This alarmed Pakistani authorities, and they started mobilizing their forces along the border to face any Indian aggression. The dismemberment of East Pakistan in 1971 made Pakistan fearful of every Indian military activity. Pakistan's defensive response alarmed India, provoking a counter response. Pakistan mobilized its forces along the border near Kashmir, perceived as Indian's weak point. The tension between the two states was at its peak by 23rd January, 1987, and war seemed to be a real possibility. General Sundarji, Indian Chief of Army Staff persuaded Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to conduct a large military exercise near Pakistan's border. This exercise was meant to check Pakistan and its allies (the US and Chinese) response.

Pakistan signaled that it had nuclear weapons and could use it in a war against India. This signal played a significant role in averting conventional war in that period. There was a general perception that India will surely go for a conventional war against Pakistan due to Indian military exercises with live ammunition. The two states may have a number of weapons during the crises that stopped India from going after Pakistan. Pakistan may have possessed the nuclear weapons even before Brasstacks 1986-87 crisis as Pakistan used nuclear deterrence to deter India during Brasstacks crisis. A.Q Khan's during the peak of the crisis in 1987 threatened India that Pakistan had the nuclear weapons and if India initiates war against Pakistan, it may use nuclear weapons against its adversary.

For the first time, the world community knew about Indo-Pak nuclear weapons capabilities during the height of the Brasstacks crisis in 1987, when Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, in an interview with Indian journalist Kudip Nayar, revealed about Pakistan's nuclear bomb. The basic objective of the interview was to communicate a nuclear deterrent signal to New Delhi (Chakma, 2005). It was further confirmed when the leaders of the two countries started threatening each other with nuclear weapons. In March 1987, General Zia ul Haq, the then Pakistani President admitted that Pakistan can build a nuclear bomb whenever it wishes (Hagerty, 1995/96)). In response, Rajiv Gandhi said that India would meet the threat heads on with adequate response (Hagerty, 1995/96). According to Cheema (2004: 4), General Zia-Ul-Haq feared the possibility of facing a two-front war, one with the Soviet or Afghan forces and other with India and "the perception of such a threat accentuated when India mobilized a quarter of a million troops just twenty miles from the border in the winter months of 1986-87, opposite Pakistan's province of Sindh, in a military exercise code-named Brasstacks." However, Pakistan countered the threat by deploying its forces, issuing nuclear threats and using diplomacy.

The US seemed concerned over the South Asian situation and put all its efforts to reduce the tension between the two states. The US President Reagan's phone calls to Gandhi and Zia helped defuse the tension between the two states. The US assurances convinced India to open negotiations with Pakistan. The diplomatic efforts helped the withdrawal of forces from the border by 19th February 1987. The US played a vital role in reducing tension between Pakistan and India, as it did in Arab-Israeli conflicts. The easing of tension was also attributed to Rajiv Gandhi's decision not to follow the advice of his senior military officers to attack Pakistan in January, 1987.

Although India mobilized its forces on the border in disguise of military exercises Brasstacks by end of 1986, it did not opt for war against Pakistan due to Pakistan's nuclear threats. This success boosted Pakistan's confidence in the coming days. After its success in averting Indian threat of conventional war, Pakistan not only felt secure against India and accelerated support to Kashmiri

liberation movement in Indian held Kashmir (IHK), which led to another crisis between the two nuclear-weapon states in 1990.

The height of Kashmir insurgency in 1990 further exacerbated the India-Pakistan problem. India accused Pakistan of supporting armed infiltration in IHK and running militant training camps in Pakistan controlled Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) which Pakistan denied. In response to Kashmir insurgency, India wanted to end this episode by targeting the alleged militant training camps in AJK as claimed by India, and crush the insurgency in IHK forever. Pakistan perceived a threat when Indian forces advanced to the border, prompting Pakistan to take necessary action to defend its sovereignty. In this connection, Cheema argued, "Fearing an Indian attack to deflect pressure from Kashmir, Pakistan counter-mobilized its elite troops in the north. However, in view of the conventional military asymmetry, Pakistan reportedly maneuvered its incipient nuclear weapons capability" (Cheema, 2004). The US involved in the situation after its intelligence officials reported about the complexity of the situation where the two states can go for a war which could further result in nuclear confrontation (Wieninger, 2004, 233).

There had been reports that General Aslam Beg, then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) of Pakistan, and his military colleagues believed that few F-16s with conventional weapons may not stop Indian aggression, and only nuclear weapons could do it. These reports were later on denied by General Aslam Beg. The severity of 1990 crisis was aptly quoted by Hersh (1993), who claimed that Pakistan pre-positioned F-16s on full alert, ready to launch on command, and sent a message to New Delhi that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons if a war took place. Pakistan's military officials later on denied Hersh's claim. Pakistan thought a real possibility of Indian conventional attack and discussed options to face such an attack in high-level meeting. (Wieninger 2004, 233).

Fearing the worst in South Asia, the US President George Bush instructed Robert Gates to visit Pakistan and India to defuse the tension between the two states. There was a general consensus between security analysts from the US, Russia, Japan and Europe that any war in South Asia could lead to a nuclear conflict (Chari, Cheema, & Cohen, 2009). Gates urged Pakistani and Indian leaders not to aggravate the situation further, as any war between the two states will not benefit any side (Wieninger, 2004, 233-4). The US diplomatic intervention helped ease tension between the two states, as both sides became ready to defuse the tension.

Indo-Pak crisis 1990, in the result of height in Kashmir insurgency, was not a serious conventional crisis in reality as there was no war mobilization on the two sides. It only remained limited to verbal threats from the two sides. Pakistan perceived itself safe against Indian conventional military threat during the period of the crisis. In this connection, Maria Sultan argued that this crisis served interests of India, Pakistan and the US as India tried to show its people that Pakistan's nuclear threats have stopped it from opting the conventional war against it, while Pakistan wanted the world to know about its nuclear weapons capabilities. However, the US stopped Pakistan's economic and military aid after CIA's report revealed Pakistan's nuclear weapons mobilization (M. Sultan, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2015).

INDIA AND PAKISTAN CRISES BETWEEN 1998 AND 2019

One year after testing their weapons in 1998, India and Pakistan faced another major crisis called Kargil conflict. Some analysts called it a limited war, after a lull period of 28 years. The conflict was

triggered when Kashmiri Mujahidin entered into Indian evacuated check posts at Kargil with the intention to cut the Indian supply line to IHK and bring an international community's attention to Kashmir dispute. India alleged Pakistan of its forces' presence at Kargil which Pakistan denied. Pakistan narrated that Indian brutalities in IHK had resulted in Kashmiri Mujahidin's reprisal at Kargil.

India responded by deploying a large number of its troops to engage with Kashmiri Mujahidin at Kargil. The fight became intense at the Kargil border, as Indian Air Force (IAF) started bombing the intruders. Although nuclear weapons capabilities made Indian and Pakistani governments vigilant in their conventional military adventures, India seemed prepared to escalate the conflict if required. In this connection, Sagan (2001, 1074) added that worried about Indian position, Pakistani authorities made nuclear threats, tonot hesitate usingany weapon in their arsenal to defend their country's territorial integrity. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmed said that Pakistan will not hesitate to use any weapon against India to defend its sovereignty.

As the conflict worsened, diplomatic initiatives, especially by the US to reduce tension in the region, started to bear fruits. The US President Bill Clinton in a meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif insisted Pakistan to influence Kashmiri Mujahidin to withdraw from Kargil, fearing a full-fledged war between Pakistan and India. The diplomacy became successful, and the tension between the two states started reducing its intensity.

Kargil conflict sent a message to the world that there is a high risk of nuclear conflict in South Asia (Wieninger 2004, 251). Kargil conflict changed the perception of nuclear deterrence theory that nuclear weapons deter war between nuclear weapons states. Cheema, (2004,: 9) argued that "Kargil was a grim reminder that the open testing and declaration of nuclear weapons in 1998 did not necessarily terminate the potential for a spill-over of conventional hostilities into a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan." Furthermore, (Wieninger 2004, 243) supported the viewpoint of deterrence pessimists and argued that the limited war between Pakistan and India in 1999 seemed to force nuclear optimists to alter their original claim that there will be no conventional wars between nuclear weapons state, as nuclear capabilities deter states from pursuing full-fledged wars.

Although Kargil incursion by Mujahidin was a severe blow to Indian forces India did not go for a conventional war against Pakistan and preferred to remain focused on Kargil sector as they could end the incursion. India's focus on Kargil sector in IHK clearly indicated that Indians were not willing to go for a conventional war against Pakistan and they wanted to keep their focus on Kargil sector. Kargil conflict gave Indians justification that the space for conventional war prevails under the nuclear overhaul, which led to Indian mobilization in 2001-02 crisis.

The terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13th December 2001 was seen by India as an imminent threat to its sovereignty. The crisis may have been more prone to war if any prominent Indian leader would have been killed in the terrorist attack. The incident resulted in a military standoff between the two hostile neighbours, as they deployed about one million troops along the border. This crisis was a serious military standoff between the two countries after 1986-87 crisis where the two militaries were in an eye ball to eye ball situation through the whole year of 2002. The terrorist attacks in the US, which caused a loss of more than 3000 lives and extreme destruction in New York and Washington D.C, drastically altered the perceptions of the international community

towards militant groups worldwide. In the aftermath of these attacks, the US started a worldwide campaign against terrorism, with the aim of targeting Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and its affiliated groups worldwide. Hardly a month after these attacks which resulted in a world fury, the IJK's Legislative Assembly building was targeted on 1st October 2001 by militant group Jaish-e-Muhammad claiming 38 lives. It was fortunate that this attack did not result in a crisis between India and Pakistan. However, the situation worsened and resulted in severe crisis when the Indian Parliament was attacked on 13th December 2001. In response, India decided to go after Pakistan taking advantage of the post-9/11 scenario. This situation led to a military buildup on the two sides with India moving its 500,000 troops on the border and Pakistan responding with 300,000 troops. The relations between the two states reached at the lowest point.

Throughout the year 2002, the two militaries were on alert, ready for war, leading to a hazardous situation. Any new terrorist attack could have triggered new military skirmishes, leading to conventional war, and possibly resulting in a nuclear confrontation. It was a gloomy period for peace and stability, where both sides were at the brink of war (Cheema 2004: 12). The situation was so serious that the US advised its citizens to leave India and Pakistan, fearful of a nuclear confrontation (Croft, 2005). This crisis highlighted new dynamics shaping nuclear South Asia, when policymakers of the two countries repeatedly threatened each other with the use of nuclear weapons (Hoodbhoy, & Mian, 2002). In post 9/11 period, the US had listed the militant groups Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba as terrorist organizations – which forced Pakistan to ban these groups and take action against them. Under extreme international pressure and Indian military build up, Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf announced a crackdown on the militant groups operating in Pakistan's territory. However, Musharraf declined an Indian demand to hand over some 20 people Indians alleged for their involvement in the terrorist attack. In this period, Pakistan arrested some 2000 militants and closed down more than 300 of their offices.

India wanted to go for a conventional war against Pakistan during the crisis 2001-02 in the result of terrorist attack on Indian Parliament. Indians wanted to benefit from the changing world situation that had emerged after terrorist attacks on World Trade Centers and Pentagon in the US. The US war on terror against Afghanistan motivated Israel and India to take action against their adversaries. In the meantime, Israel made a bombardment on Palestine in which Palestinian leader Yasir Arfat lost his life whereas India mobilized its force against Pakistan. Indian mobilization took a longer time of more than a month which provided space for Pakistan's counter mobilization and active international diplomacy. All the major powers including the US played its role to avert war between India and Pakistan. The US played the major role in averting conventional war between the two states as it did not want any war between the two states when it was indulged in countering terrorism in Afghanistan.

There was a serious threat of accidental war between the two sides during the whole year of 2002. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf threatened India in an address on Pakistan's official TV channel that if war is imposed on Pakistan, it can use all kinds of weapons for its defense including non-conventional weapons. Pakistan's high military official Lieutenant General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai who was also Director General of Strategic Plans Division in an interview to Italian journalists, indicated some of the scenarios in which Pakistan could use nuclear weapons against its adversary. Although the nuclear deterrence played its role in forcing India to opt for a restraint, the international

diplomacy and especially US played well to avert conventional war between the two countries.

Crises after Mumbai Attacks

There would have been three more crises in the coming years with the dimension of a limited conventional war but India did not go for it due to a threat of Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons. In this series, first was Mumbai crisis when terrorists attacked Indian economic hub Mumbai in 2008.

India mobilized its forces at some places on the border with Pakistan but it was not a war mobilization. Pakistan also mobilized some of its forces on the border. In this connection, Kidwai witnessed:

Though Indians deployed forces in South Barmir, Jaisalmir and Joutpur and even in Pokhran etc opposite to Pakistan's province of Sindh, in every crisis, they deploy over there, so they deployed, they also deployed in Western Punjab and Eastern Punjab but practically, they realized that this has happened but it needs to be established and in any case Pakistan counter mobilized and the nuclear factor also played its role over there (K. A. Kidwai, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2015).

Although Indian media created war hype and Indian politicians threatened Pakistan of stern action; India did not go for a war mobilization against Pakistan. Indians have always been searching for space for conventional war against Pakistan while denying the fact that nuclear-weapon states do not fight a conventional war because it always keeps the fear of nuclear confrontation. The world has not noticed any conventional war among the nuclear weapon states like the US, Soviet Union (Russia), Britain, France and China. Further these nuclear weapon states are engaged in dialogue on Syrian Crisis or South China Sea crisis. While in South Asian case, India is not admitting the fact that nuclear weapon states do not engage in conventional war against each other (K. A. Kidwai, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2015).

Indian intention to fight a limited war against Pakistan under nuclear overhaul seemed difficult to be justified as no direct war had been experienced among the nuclear weapons states in the world. In this connection, Kidwai argued that the Indian Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) is far away from reality and can be drawn in theoretical framework, but on the practical ground, it is almost impossible to practice it on the battlefield. It is visible during Indo-Pak 2008 crisis that they could not operationalize it against Pakistan. During Mumbai crisis in 2008, the real test came for Indian CSD but it failed as India did not opt for a limited war against Pakistan (K. A. Kidwai, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2015).

Although the Mumbai crisis was of serious nature, India did not opt for conventional war against Pakistan because of the early stages of the CSD. Both Pakistan's nuclear weapons and the US role helped to avert the crises between India and Pakistan. In this connection, Zamir Akram said, Indian CSD was evolving during 2008 Mumbai crisis so it was not in the position of actual operationalization and further Indians were cautious during 2008 crisis because they knew one thing that if they initiate an attack against Pakistan then no one knows what would be its result as Pakistan will also retaliate and that thing basically stopped them from going after Pakistan during 2008 Mumbai crisis (personal communication, Nov. 14, 2015).

With the experience of Indo-Pak 2001-02 crisis, Indians had left the option of a full-fledged conventional war against Pakistan. Since Indians started CSD in 2004, fear clouds of conventional

war are hovering over Pakistan. Due to early stages of CSD, India did not opt for the limited war.

Crises after Uri Attack

Kashmir saw another episode of violent protests and insurgency in 2016 after killing young Kashmiri insurgent leader Burhan Wani in clash with Indian military. This incident led to a severe crisis in IHK as anti-Indian protests continued for months, which resulted in heavy casualties and left thousands of people injured in the Indian military firing. This new wave of violence further increased the number of militant attacks on Indian army. India alleged Pakistan of its involvement in deteriorating the situation in IHK. In the meantime, the militants attacked Indian military headquarters in Uri in IHK on 17th September 2016 killing 17 Indian soldiers (Safi, 2016).

India faced extreme anger inside the country, and alleged Pakistan of its support to militants. This incident fueled the fire in Indo-Pak relations which were already in troubled waters. Indians said that they will take action against the militants who were responsible for this attack. The situation became serious when the two states started threatening each other with severe consequences. Pakistan started taking all significant steps to secure it against any Indian military adventure. Pakistan's main motorway was closed for Pakistan Air Force (PAF) exercises and images of PAF aircrafts landing on motorway became headline in the media. This step showed the severity of the situation between the states during this crisis.

Both states were indulged in continuous clashes on the border during crisis period. In the meanwhile, Indians claimed to launch surgical strikes in AJK. India claimed that its forces entered Pakistani territory, destroyed six "terrorist launch pads and killed 40 terrorists" who were planning to launch terrorist attacks on Indian mainland. Pakistan denied Indian claim of surgical strikes and stated the official position that there had been heavy firing on the border between the forces of the two countries in which some of both sides' soldiers also lost their lives. In this connection, the international media reported heavy clashes between the two countries on the border but did not borrow Indian claim of launching surgical strikes inside AJK. The defense analyst Ayesha Siddiqi while talking to BBC Urdu said that there had been some movement on the border in which Indian soldiers entered into AJK, but their movement was about 200 meters and not two kilometers as claimed by Indian politicians (BBC, Urdu, 30th September, 2016). It was believed that Indian surgical strikes against Pakistan was dangerous in a sense that it could have brought Pakistan's response as India faced an adversary which had used nuclear weapons as a shield to continue sub conventional warfare against it in the region (Joshi, 2016).

The clashes between India and Pakistan continued for many days in which the two parties alleged each other of ceasefire violations and killing each other's soldiers. The major powers including the US asked the two states to have patience. It was good luck that Pakistan denied Indian claim of launching surgical strikes on its territory otherwise, the crisis would have been converted into a conventional war. If Pakistan had accepted that Indians launched surgical strikes inside AJK, then its government and forces had been under extreme pressure from its people for a counter attack. If Pakistan had gone for a counter attack on Indian territory, the situation between the two countries had worsened. This chain of attack, counter attack, could have led the two nuclear-weapon states towards war. Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons successfully deterred India to opt for limited war.

Pulwama Attack and its Aftermath

The last crisis between India and Pakistan occurred in February 2019 when militants launched an attack against Indian forces in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir. This led to a serious blame game between India and Pakistan. India threatened to take revenge. This crisis was highlighted because of the dog fight between IAF and PAF. Indian aircrafts entered into Pakistani territory and threw explosives in Balakot which hit the plain areas while no losses were reported. PAF responded by throwing explosives on Indian plain areas to show its capability. When IAF again tried to cross the border, it was targeted by PAF, and this dog fight destroyed Indian aircraft and Pakistani soldiers arrested one Indian Pilot. With goodwill gesture, Pakistan decided to release Indian Pilot and the crisis started to diffuse within the next few days.

During the period of crisis, Pakistan conducted a meeting of National Command Authority to discuss the crisis situation and the message was clear as narrated by Major General Asif Ghafoor, the then Director General, Inter Service Public Relations while speaking to journalists, "I hope you know what the NCA means and what it constitutes" (The **News**, February 27, 2019). Therefore, the message which went to Indians was clear that Pakistan was ready to counter India at all levels, and there should be no misunderstanding on Indian side in connection to Pakistan's options. While concluding argument about Indo-Pak 2019 crisis, Dalton Comments:

Before the next crisis, policy analysts, scholars, and officials from the region and beyond should assess in particular how signals were conveyed during this episode, what the senders intended, how the receivers interpreted them and what that implies for escalation managements (Dalton, 2019).

Pakistan's inferiority in conventional military capability made it more dependent on its nuclear weapons. Pakistan's development in all spheres of deterrence as it has gone for a "Full Spectrum Deterrence" made Indian option of war off the table (P. Das, personal communication, Feb. 9, 2016). Both state's nuclear weapons created a balance of terror, and despite threatening statements, the two sides cannot do anything (O. Marwah, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2016).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, nuclear signaling has proved to be effective in last seven crises between two South Asian nuclear weapon states. Pakistan's nuclear signaling has effectively contributed to averting full-fledged and limited conventional war between India and Pakistan. The nuclear deterrence remained effective in stopping India from going after Pakistan in the two crises in 1987 and 1990 before the two states tested their nuclear weapons. After India and Pakistan's nuclear tests in May, 1998, the nuclear deterrence became more effective in stopping India from pursuing the path of war against Pakistan between 1998 and 2019.

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