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The Independence-Dependence Paradox: Stability Dilemmas in South

Feroz Hassan Khan

Has a new era of détente and stability emerged in South Asia five years after India and Pakistan first openly tested nuclear weapons? In the process, have India and Pakistan effectively demonstrated the value of nuclear weapons in deterring war? Deterrence optimists claim that fear of the ultimate weapon has restrained the otherwise rough actors who have been at each others' throats more often than any other nuclear neighbors in the nuclear age. Empirical evidence also suggests that the region has been spared from major wars, despite recurrent crises during the past two decades.

Deterrence pessimists, however, dispute that nuclear weapons have had a stabilizing impact in the region. Indeed, the advent of nuclear weapons has witnessed increased tensions, a growing arms race, and a half-dozen crises nearing war. The region has come close to full blows at least twice since the open 1998 nuclear weapons tests—in 1999 and 2001-2002—and thrice earlier in the covert nuclear period—in 1984, 1986-1987, and 1989-1990. In fact, the three most recent crises—in 1990, 1999, and 2001-2002—only avoided escalating into a full-scale war because of intense U.S. diplomacy.

In fact, it could be argued that the deterrence equation in South Asia now implicitly depends on U.S. intervention. In essence, India's and Pakistan's nuclear policies involve what might be called the "independence-dependence paradox." These two proud countries have attempted to wean themselves from outside support by using nuclear weapons. But this strategy has ironically served to make them more dependent on other powers who are forced to mitigate the consequences of this arms race. No other country has played a more crucial role than the United States.

In many ways, this paradox does more to explain the difficulty in constraining conflicts that threaten to involve the two countries' nuclear arsenals than the much ballyhooed "stability-instability" paradox. That term originated during the Cold War when analysts such as Glenn Snyder and Robert Jervis sought to explain why, in the first nuclear age, the superpowers managed to avoid conventional armed conflicts that could have precipitated into nuclear exchange, instead using proxy wars to gain advantage over the other.¹ In recent years, many theorists have sought to apply the Cold War term to the standoff between India and Pakistan.² But that has only highlighted the crucial differences between the Cold War and the new, complex realities in South Asia.

In the case of India and Pakistan, nuclear weapons are entangled with bitter regional disputes, exacerbating the instability half of the original stability-instability paradox. Yet, the other half—stability—is still evolving and has yet to mature.³ Because the issues concerned are critical to India's and Pakistan's core national identities, the two states have exercised force and coerced each other several times, pushing crises to the brink. De-escalation has, more often

than not, required successful, outside (read, U.S.) intervention. Having achieved requisite nuclear deterrence, neither side is prepared to concede to the other, each testing the vulnerability of the other in a game of “chicken.” This brinkmanship strategy has placed the region into a delicate balance whose repeated crises have only made it more dependent on the United States.

Yet, even as India and Pakistan count on U.S. intervention to restrain its adversary and ensure stability, paradoxically they are adamant about their professed independence in nuclear matters. Historically, the two South Asian states developed their nuclear arsenals much against the will and nonproliferation efforts of the West. Even today, India and Pakistan take little heed of outside powers as they develop and possibly deploy strategic weapons. That attitude has constrained the ability of the United States to promote stability, especially in the early phases of a crisis or a potential war.⁴

Nuclear Weapons as a Means of Achieving Strategic Independence

Underlying India’s and Pakistan’s development of nuclear weapons was their quest for genuine independence, which began in the wake of painful experiences with outside powers: first, under British rule and, later, under the umbrella of Soviet and U.S.-led alliances in 1960 and the early 1970s. In particular, the South Asian states pursued the nuclear option after repeated defeats on the conventional battlefield and perceived abandonment by outside allies. For India, its loss to China in a 1962 border conflict proved decisive; for Pakistan, its twin losses to India in 1965 and 1971 pushed it down the nuclear path. Nuclear weapons were intended to replace outside dependence and were seen as a source of security and political independence. Stephen Cohen has likened Pakistan’s strategic decisions to those of Israel: “Both [Israel and Pakistan] sought an entangling alliance with various outside powers (at various times, Britain, France, China and the U.S.), both ultimately concluded that outsiders could not be trusted in a moment of extreme crisis, and this led them to develop nuclear weapons.”⁵

Soon after embarking on its nuclear program, Pakistan formally bid farewell to the U.S.-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and Central Treaty Organization alliances and joined India as a member of the Non-aligned Movement. Pakistan nevertheless slowed down open development of nuclear weapons owing to its need to ensure a reliable delivery system for nuclear weapons as well as maintaining good relations with the United States. This was formally crystallized in 1985 through a U.S. law known as the Pressler amendment, after its sponsor, Senator Larry Pressler (R-S.D.). That law effectively tied Pakistan’s purchase of F-16 fighter jets to a presidential certification that Pakistan was not developing nuclear weapons.⁶ That meant Pakistan had to calibrate its strategic policy carefully, keeping its nuclear weapons development discreet and a short screwdriver’s turn away from operation.

India likewise continued its nuclear weapons development in secret although, after conducting a “peaceful nuclear explosion” in 1974, India publicly denied that it was proceeding to develop a nuclear-weapon capability. Until the 1998 nuclear tests, both countries remained ambiguous about the status of their nuclear weapons programs. In rhetorical terms, both sides frequently used phrases such as “peaceful nuclear program” and “keeping open the nuclear option,” implying commitment to “not only [retaining] freedom of action in the narrow nuclear-strategic realm but also the wider principle of state sovereignty in international relations.”⁷ In the context of the larger strategic policy, a nuclear deterrent was said to fulfill various objectives: dissuade the adversary from contemplating aggression; deter potential enemies; increase bargaining leverage; reduce dependence on allies; and acquire military independence by reducing dependence on external sources of military hardware.⁸

Threatening Instability and Engaging the United States

Before the introduction of nuclear weapons to South Asia, the United States had lesser stakes in resolving the Indo-Pakistani rivalry. The last serious and proactive attempt made by the United States was in 1962 when President John F. Kennedy sent Ambassador Averell Harriman as special envoy to the region on a fact-finding mission. South Asia then had come into U.S. focus primarily due to several developments in the region that related to Cold War

dynamics, including the 1960 shooting of a U-2 spy plane that had departed from its base in Peshawar, Pakistan, and the growing Indo-Chinese problems that eventually led to the India-China war in October 1962.

In regard to the Indo-Pakistani dispute, Harriman concluded that the Kashmir problem was too intractable.⁹ After Kennedy's assassination, and especially during the Johnson administration, other issues and events lessened U.S. interest in the region.¹⁰ From then until about the end of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union managed to keep the standoff within bounds. But as the superpower conflict was winding down, both India and Pakistan were moving apace with their nuclear programs. As their capabilities increased, they began testing each others' limits. An examination of the five South Asian crises over the past two decades reveals that India and Pakistan managed earlier crises without overt outside intervention, but as their capabilities increased, the level of crises also worsened. In fact, each crisis was more severe than the previous one, and the United States incrementally became more involved.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration quietly urged India and Pakistan to back down over crises, such as India's 1984 occupation of the Siachin glacier and India's 1986-1987 attempt to revive plans for a "preventive war" in the garb of a military exercise, known as Brasstacks.¹¹ But the regional leaders themselves made the overt gestures, such as President Zia ul-Haq's famous cricket diplomacy during the 1986-1987 crisis. In the three crises during the 1990s, on the other hand, the United States has been directly engaged, from Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates in 1990-1991 to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot in 1999 and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in 2001-2002.

The last few years following India's and Pakistan's overt nuclear tests show that nuclear deterrence has not prevented crisis. This fact was evident most notably in the 1999 Kargil crisis and in the crises of 2001-2002. In 1999 the Kargil crisis came under the clear shadow of demonstrated nuclear capability and a much-trumpeted bilateral meeting in the spring of that year at Lahore. Pakistan sponsored an attack across the Line of Control and captured an area in the vicinity of Kargil that threatened a strategic highway in northern parts of disputed Kashmir, which triggered the crisis. From Pakistan's perspective, this was a continuum of the Kashmir dynamics that was dragging on regardless of other developments in the region.

For the rest of the world, there was a new reality in South Asia. After demonstrating their nuclear capabilities, India and Pakistan were required to manage their neighborly relations differently. In the view of some analysts, Pakistan might have overestimated the value of its nuclear deterrence by hoping that India's response to the Kargil crisis would be tempered because it feared nuclear escalation.¹² Although Pakistan's official version of the event is ambiguous and muted on some questions, from hindsight and available published reports it can be concluded that Pakistan's military assessment grossly underestimated India's response as well as the diplomatic fallout. The Kargil episode illustrated the limits of nuclear dependence. Nuclear deterrence might assure security from an ultimate aggression but does not free the state to pursue a course of causing "deliberate instability" at a lower level.

The other major crisis since the 1998 tests began with the 2001 terrorist attack against the Indian parliament. On December 13, 2001, terrorists attacked the Indian parliament. India accused Pakistan of complicity and mobilized conventional forces and demanded that Islamabad cease support to insurgents in Kashmir and hand over leading militants—essentially coercing Islamabad to throw in the towel. By deploying troops along the Pakistan border and posing a physical threat to Pakistan, India compelled the United States to view the Kashmir insurgency on a par with terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In turn, Pakistan matched India with a reciprocal deployment. By mid-May 2002, another crisis erupted when terrorists attacked an Indian army camp in Kashmir. This time, the crisis reached the brink of war, a situation unprecedented since the 1971 war. Islamabad then further fueled the crisis by conducting three missile tests in late May 2002. Simultaneously, Pakistan threatened to withdraw forces that were deployed on its western border in support of U.S. operations in Afghanistan and hinted at requesting the withdrawal of the U.S. base at Jacobabad in Pakistan if war with India broke out.¹³

These moves not only sent a message to India but also affected the United States and other Western countries, kindling fear that the countries might pass the nuclear threshold if conventional war broke out. But Islamabad also sought to avoid panic and thus offered peaceful reassurance to both India and the United States.¹⁴ The United States acted to calm the crisis through phone calls from President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell to the leaders of India and Pakistan and then by sending Armitage and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to the region. These actions were largely responsible for preventing escalation.

Cold War wisdom suggests that, when two states have the capability to assure each others' destruction, the cost of war and the risk of inadvertent escalation must outweigh any potential gains either state could countenance.¹⁵ India and Pakistan, however, have paid some costs; but it remains unclear if either side has learned the lessons, if any, and what costs are at stake. India believes that, in 2001-2002, it successfully compelled the United States to act and extract a public commitment from Pakistan to end support for militants in Kashmir. Yet, India continues to believe it has space to wage a limited conventional war that it can win. Pakistan believes that its policy of reciprocal deployment and deterrent signaling, such as testing missiles, prevented India from going any further and that the risk of nuclear escalation checkmates any conventional adventure India might contemplate. It nevertheless took 10 months of mobilization and force deployment for India finally to conclude that the risks and potential cost of a general conflict "trumped any desire to resolve the Kashmir dispute by force."¹⁶

Still, as both sides fell back to their respective positions, they repeated their familiar pattern: India alleged that Pakistan supported militant infiltration into India, then Pakistan denied this, and so India refused to start a dialogue. Once again it fell to the United States to goad both sides into some sort of thaw.¹⁷ Finally on April 17, 2003, after procrastinating for several months, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee held out a hand of friendship. Since then, both sides have shown flexibility and cautiously crawled back to the basics of state-to-state relations: exchanging envoys, resuming bus service, easing some visa issues, and other small steps. But so far, they have shied away from tackling major issues, especially the core issue of Kashmir, which both states believe belongs rightfully to them. Although the recent efforts are positive, the fear remains that terrorists in the region might strike and blow away the fledgling peace steps at any moment. But there is still hope that more comprehensive bilateral talks might begin at some point.

A Strategy of Brinkmanship

In the final analysis, the nuclear reality and the overall political and strategic framework make a war infeasible for both countries. India has assured asymmetric destruction—both conventional and nuclear—in its favor. India's aim is to crush the insurgency in Kashmir, keep the limited conventional war option open, and hold Pakistan under threat of massive nuclear retaliation in the event Pakistan contemplates the threat or use of the nuclear card. This concept assumes that India could design a war with limited scope, retain escalation control, and thereby erode Pakistan's nuclear deterrent against conventional aggression by calling its nuclear bluff.

On the other hand, Pakistan's strategy is to deny India space for waging a conventional war and to be prepared to expand any war, retain the nuclear use option, and make costs exceed any benefits that India might calculate—basically, to deny India victory on the cheap. Even if Pakistan risks survival in a prolonged all-out war due to structural asymmetries with India, Islamabad keeps close to its chest a repertoire of strategies to offset and "design around" India's numerical conventional force advantage and its own geophysical vulnerabilities. In such a deterrence construct, both sides seek room to elbow each other out, engage in brinkmanship, and test the others' resolve.

Professor Robert Powell from the University of California at Berkeley has explained the conundrum of nuclear deterrence stability within the dynamics of brinkmanship.¹⁸ States might seek to exert coercive pressure on each other by raising the risk that events will spiral out of control. How much risk they are willing to bear will be limited by the relative value each state places on the issues at stake relative to the risks involved. This logic implies that brinkmanship is not reckless behavior but a means to test the resolve of an opponent and run risks to outbid the other,

especially in situations where all-out wars are prohibitively costly. Powell also asserts that brinkmanship crises only occur if the balance of resolve is uncertain. When each state believes that it is likely to be more resolute than the other state, then each might escalate in the expectation that the other will back down.¹⁹

This logic is vividly applicable in the case of South Asia. Both countries hurl themselves into crises that deepen, escalate, and reach a point of spiraling out of control, only to unwind with outside intervention—notably by the United States. One author has suggested that “India and Pakistan brinkmanship is not wild-eyed but designed to meet policy objectives.... Pakistan ratchets up tensions to garner external (mainly U.S.) pressure on India to come to [the] bargaining table, India uses coercive diplomacy to bring pressure on Pakistan to halt support for militants.... In using brinkmanship both India and Pakistan want ultimately [to be] held back while having the United States push their interests forward.”²⁰ But this strategy leaves the region in a dangerous limbo because the decision is left to the United States to determine whether it intervenes or not.²¹

The South Asian protagonists have thus become more dependent than ever on the United States. Yet, much to the chagrin of the region, the United States has neither the time nor the patience to accord priority to the region, which President Bill Clinton once described as the “most dangerous place.”²² Consequently, a dangerous pattern has set in: India and Pakistan push a crisis to the brink, anticipating U.S. intervention, and the United States might take its time in the belief that South Asian crises are manageable through “firefighting diplomacy” and that there is no urgency to launch a proactive process of conflict resolution. The brinkmanship is not aimed to fight a war but to win the crisis, and both hope that the U.S. intervention would be helpful. One scholar has noted, “Each has misread its closer ties to the United States as evidence that Washington has embraced its perspective. Each has treated the intense engagement and military presence of the United States as insurance against escalation to war.”²³

The outcome of the latest crisis, in fact, offers a cautionary tale for the future and a new twist on the stability-instability paradox. India believed that ensuring nuclear stability provided space to consider a limited war and coerce a nuclear neighbor. But a semblance of instability—through missile signaling (dubbed as missile antics by India)—worked to deter the adversary as well as induce diplomacy. War was prevented, but this set a dangerous precedent. India might believe that conventional force mobilization did not prove sufficiently credible in this crisis; the next time it would test the resolve by seeking a higher threat that might include waging a war that would certainly spiral out of control.

The U.S. Role

The United States faces several challenges in the region. First, it must balance its interests regarding India and Pakistan with its global responsibilities. U.S. interests are different, less intense, and more sporadic than those of local actors, which serve to limit U.S. influence even though U.S. clout in the region has never been as influential as it is now, especially with India. The second challenge for the United States is to manage the tension between its twin objectives of war prevention and nonproliferation. The larger U.S. objective is to prevent nuclear states from going to war and prevent war-prone states from going nuclear. Efforts to solve regional problems, such as technical assistance for nuclear command, control, and communication in South Asia, might create undesirable precedents. Third, the United States faces a dilemma in how to balance between India and Pakistan, best exemplified by the difficulties it faces in providing military aid. U.S. efforts to increase one country’s security might increase the other side’s insecurity, such as providing F-16s to Pakistan to redress her air force deficiency or missile defenses to India to protect against Pakistan’s potent missile force.²⁴

Clearly, the United States is preoccupied with other global issues, so it is mostly up to India and Pakistan to resolve their problems and reduce their dependence on outside powers. Both sides must initiate nuclear risk reduction measures; expand the existing links to include links with respective nuclear command authorities; revive the spirit of the existing confidence-building measures and initiate new ones; and expand economic ties to create more local incentives for cooperation.

Meanwhile, the United States can play its part by engaging now rather than waiting to take part in crisis management. The next South Asia crisis is likely to test the “uncertainty of resolve”²⁵ of both India and Pakistan, and the threshold and time of crises is likely to be compressed, leaving no time for scheduling a crisis management visit to the region. At a minimum, the United States should appoint a high-level ambassador to the region, as Kennedy did with Harriman in 1962, along with a strong team of U.S. experts on the region. The diplomacy process should start at two levels. At the first level, the United States must not only encourage India and Pakistan to proceed on bilateral substantive talks on a wide range of political and strategic issues, including risk reduction measures and economic links, but also monitor and record the substance of the work in progress. At another level, U.S. experts should produce a fact-finding report that the United States would use to prepare a “road map” and methodology for engaging the region that must include not just India and Pakistan but the dynamics emerging from the Afghanistan situation. A constructive, broad-based engagement by the United States— including political resolution to the conflict, strategic restraints on conventional and nuclear forces, and harnessing trade— would enable the region to maintain a path of stability and also calibrate their self-imposed paradoxes.

NOTES

1. Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in *The Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965). Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
2. Michael Krepon “Nuclear Risk Reduction: Is Cold War Experience Applicable to Southern Asia?” in *The Stability-Instability Paradox: Nuclear Weapons and Brinkmanship in South Asia*, eds. Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne, Henry L. Stimson Center paper no. 38, June 2001.
3. Feroz Hassan Khan, “Challenges to Nuclear Stability in South Asia,” *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 2003) pp. 59-73.
4. Peter Lavoy and Feroz Hassan Khan, Presentation made to the Fifth Nuclear Stability Round Table Seminar on “Strategic Stability in a Turbulent World” at Science Applications International Corp., McLean, Virginia, April 28-29, 2003.
5. Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), p. 204.
6. The Pressler amendment required the U.S. president to certify each year to Congress that Pakistan was not developing nuclear weapons.
7. Devin Hagerty, “Preventing Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia,” *Asia Society* (New York, 1995).
8. Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “Nuclear Developments in Pakistan: Future Directions,” in *Nuclear Non-Proliferation in India and Pakistan: South Asia Perspectives*, eds. PR Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, Iftikharuzzaman, Regional Center for Strategic Studies, Colombo (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1996), pp. 131-132.
9. U.S. Department of State, “Report of the Harriman Commission,” pp. 5-8, S/S Files. South Asia, DSR, NA, cited

by Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001) p. 135.

10. Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies*

11. Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation in South Asia," in *South Asia in 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances*, ed. Michael Chambers (Carlisle Barracks Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 2002), pp. 197-199.

12. Lee Feinstein, "Avoiding Another Close Call in South Asia," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2002, pp. 3-4.

13. "The Delicate Balance in South Asia," in *Strategic Survey 2002/2003* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford University Press), p. 210.

14. Bruce Blair, "Alerting in Crisis and Conventional War," in *Managing Nuclear Operations*, eds. Ashton Carter et al. (Washington DC: Brookings, 1987), p. 76. Around the first week of June 2002, Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf made reconciliatory statements that nuclear-weapon use was unthinkable and no sane person could think of using nuclear weapons.

15. Michael Krepon, "The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperception, and Escalation Control in South Asia," Henry L. Stimson Center paper, May 2003.

16. "The Delicate Balance in South Asia," p. 206.

17. After the de-escalation, the U.S. Department of State applied considerable pressure on both sides to start a dialogue. Assistant Secretary Christina Rocca and Director of Policy Planning Richard Haass made several visits to the region to urge both sides, especially India, to commence a dialogue. Despite the thaw, at the time of this writing, there are hints but no official commitment to start a comprehensive dialogue.

18. Robert Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense," *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 86-118.

19. *Ibid*, p. 93.

20. Satu Limaye, "Mediating Kashmir: A Bridge Too Far," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002-2003), p. 159.

21. For example, in the 2002 crisis, it took two weeks for Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to schedule a visit to the region when war was imminent and could have broken out under sheer momentum of the dynamics of mobilizations and deployments.

22. Judith Miller and James Risen, "The United States is Worried About an Increased Threat of Nuclear Conflict Over Kashmir," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2000.

23. Polly Nayak, "Reducing Collateral Damage to Indo-Pakistani Relations from the War on Terrorism," Policy Brief no. 107 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, September 2002), p. 2.

24. Conclusions presented by Peter Lavoy in the Fifth Nuclear Stability Round Table Seminar on "Strategic Stability in a Turbulent World" at Science Applications International Corp., McLean, Virginia, April 28-29, 2003.

25. Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense," pp. 91-100.

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