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Militancy, Great Powers, and the Risk of Escalation in South Asia's Nuclear Crises

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Summary
Recent threats posed by non-state actors and the intervention of third parties have made traditional theories of nuclear proliferation inadequate when it comes to explaining South Asia's complex security environment. As a result, a number of policy adjustments are required in order to manage the tense relations between India and Pakistan, as Nicolas Blarel and Hannes Ebert argue.

Introduction

On August 16, 2012, the Pakistani air force base at Minhas was attacked by what the authorities claimed to be Islamic militants from the tribal areas of North Waziristan (Walsh 2012).[1] What made this attack so different is that Minhas is alleged to store components of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile, which is estimated to include 90–110 warheads. Yet while there is no conclusive evidence that the attack was specifically targeting these weapons, it adds further substance to recent speculation that Islamabad is losing control of its nuclear arsenal to militant non-state actors (Narang 2009, 2010: 40). The latest skirmishes at the Line of Control between the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir in early January 2013, the origins and responsibilities of which are not yet clear, have further fueled fears that the firing of bullets could escalate into a nuclear confrontation (Timmons 2013). Both of these incidents seem to demonstrate the limits of utilizing traditional theoretical approaches like deterrence stability to analyze South Asia's nuclear security dynamics (DeYoung 2011; Riedel 2009).

To date, academic studies of nuclear proliferation and deterrence have focused upon bipolar confrontation and large-scale wars while neglecting nuclear deterrence in regional contexts. Existing deterrence theories might even produce opposite effects in varying contexts. The South Asian security environment, for instance, presents a

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1   This article builds on an earlier version entitled "Deterrence at Risk in South Asia," which was published by the International Relations and Security Network, ETH Zurich, see Blarel and Ebert (2012).

much more complex security environment than a simple dyadic confrontation between India and Pakistan. First, it involves a series of previously overlooked non-state actors that have increasingly impacted upon the strategic calculations of New Delhi and Islamabad. Both crises of December 2001 and November 2008 were attacks from non-state actors that could have led to a large-scale conflict with potential nuclear consequences. Moreover, external actors like the United States and China are exerting increasing influence on both states' nuclear doctrines, albeit indirectly.[2] There is no precedence in the literature for such complex triangular (or quadrangular?) relations on nuclear matters at multiple levels.

The Escalatory Potential of Non-state Actors

Traditional theories of nuclear deterrence rely on the assumption that nuclear competition is composed of two unitary, rational actors. The emergence of new actors in South Asia whose organizational structure, motives and strategies differ sharply from those of states has been a neglected factor in existing dyadic approaches to deterrence and proliferation. There has, for instance, been a long history of Pakistani-sponsored militancy in the Kashmir region. Feeling threatened by India's conventional military superiority, Pakistan has armed, trained, and given sanctuary to organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and used them as tools of asymmetric warfare to tie down large numbers of Indian soldiers in Kashmir. The nuclearization of the subcontinent has further encouraged the Pakistani military to use this unconventional and opportune strategy of asymmetric warfare on Indian territory.

In the South Asian context, there are two potential nuclear threats emanating from these non-state actors. The first possibility is for militant groups in Pakistan to gain direct access to nuclear weapons. Many analysts are concerned that a Pakistani nuclear weapon might fall into the hands of militants as a result of either a serious deterioration of Pakistan's political situation or another attack similar to the one witnessed on August 16 (Clary 2010). However, while the domestic situation in Pakistan remains volatile, this concern has often been exaggerated. Conscious of such risks, the U.S. has been secretly helping the Pakistani army to guard its nuclear arsenal (Sanger and Broad 2007).

The second and most immediate threat is the role of non-state groups in instigating major diplomatic crises with escalatory potential, as demonstrated by the Mumbai attacks in 2008. When India is attacked by such actors based in Pakistan (and sometimes with connections to the Pakistani intelligence services), does it inherently infer that such actions represent the intentions and designs of the Pakistani

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2 Other deficiencies of classic nuclear deterrence theory applied to South Asia have already been covered sufficiently, namely the "deficiencies in deterrence theory pertaining to conflictual dyads involving states differing vastly in size, resources, and power" (Karnad 2005: 173) and the misleading reliance on unitary models of deterrence stability (Perkovich 2012).

authorities? In the traditional logic of deterrence, India could have signaled credible nuclear threats, which would have made Pakistani-sponsored attacks against India prohibitively expensive. Instead, the fear of nuclear escalation has limited India's strategic options for retaliation. Furthermore, because these groups have gradually moved away from Pakistani sponsorship by obtaining funding from international networks, they are undeterred by India's nuclear arsenal (Ganguly and Kapur 2010). These increasingly independent non-state actors are not affected by considerations about deterrence or mutually assured destruction. While the militant campaign may not directly be part of any official Pakistani strategy, it leads India to react in order to preserve the credibility of its nuclear deterrent (Kapur 2007). As future crises can erupt without any deliberate decisions taken by Pakistani leaders, the risk of nuclear escalation has become more probable (Coll 2006).

India's refusal to accept Pakistan's nuclear blackmail has already led to two major diplomatic crises with the potential for nuclear escalation, namely in 2001–2 and 2008 (Kapur 2009). As some of the militant groups involved operated in Pakistan, one solution has been for India to threaten to punish Pakistan directly rather than striking at the militants themselves, notably through its "Cold Start" doctrine (Dasgupta and Cohen 2011; Ladwig III 2008). On December 13, 2001, a handful of militants attacked the Indian parliament building in New Delhi, resulting in the deaths of seven guards and five attackers. Indian authorities quickly blamed the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the LeT for the assault. This crisis, which followed only two years after the Kargil conflict, which had been initiated by Pakistan, encouraged the Indian military to seek a new military doctrine and capabilities to deter Pakistan from undertaking or allowing similar low-intensity aggression in the future. The objective of this informal doctrine would be to take hold of an important part of Pakistani territory large enough to harm Pakistan, but not to threaten the state's survival. This solved the problem of attribution, which is determinant for successful deterrence.

However, the failure of "Operation Parakram" in 2001–2 to obtain Pakistani guarantees to fight terrorism within its own territory demonstrated the practical difficulty of deterring such unconventional, low-level threats with coercive diplomacy. The problem with the operationalization of the Cold Start doctrine was that it could still create conditions for nuclear war. The situation is complicated when Pakistan denies having any connection with or control over the perpetrators of the attacks. Furthermore, these strategies do not solve the long-term problem of militancy based in Pakistan and might even aggravate tensions (Ladwig III 2008). The continued projection of violence from Pakistan into India has demonstrated that deterrence has failed to prevent terrorist aggression.

As a result, theories of deterrence have shown their limited explanatory leverage in accounting for and anticipating the outbreak of nuclear crises in South Asia. In fact, in order to obtain better explanations and predictions of conflict in South Asia, it

seems wiser to turn to non-nuclear-related explanations that are rather more idiosyncratic. Factors such as domestic politics (Sagan 2009), Pakistan's irredentist claim to Kashmir, the imbalance in conventional military capabilities, or the increasing use of asymmetric warfare and proxy militant groups have been equally or even more decisive in explaining the initiation and resolution of the recent crises. Since political instability existed before nuclear weapons in South Asia, it could be argued that the nuclearization of the subcontinent has not profoundly modified Indo-Pakistani rivalry. Nuclear forces can be interpreted more as intervening variables, interacting with other pre-existing non-nuclear factors, either enabling or limiting their salience. Although nuclear forces have induced some level of caution in crisis management at the level of the governments in Delhi and Islamabad, recent crises have also demonstrated greater confidence on the part of non-state actors in provoking situations with escalatory potential. If New Delhi does develop anything close to the Cold Start doctrine of air strikes combined with the capture of non-vital Pakistani territory in response to the rising threat of asymmetric warfare, the next crisis on the subcontinent could even spiral into a new type of conflict.

Pivotal Deterrence, Trilateral Compellence, and the Asian "Super"-Complex

Nuclear deterrence in South Asia is also influenced by the actions of extra-regional nuclear powers that have an interest in managing Indo-Pakistani rivalries. The most important stakeholders here are China and the United States (Chari et al. 2007: 217–219). Under American supervision, all previous nuclear crises between India and Pakistan ended in a conciliatory outcome while also spurring strong reactions from China (Chakma 2012; Ganguly and Kapur 2008; Mohan 2003).[3] In fact, the U.S. and Chinese responses to the crises pose three challenges to "classic" deterrence models and policies.

Firstly, they reveal the emergence of triangular strategic relations in nuclear affairs. Traditional Cold War deterrence, based on a simplified dyadic opposition of unitary and rational actors and concepts like mutual assured destruction, overlook this new and decisive dimension. Instead, South Asia demonstrates that extra-regional powers' interventions in crises have often taken the shape of "pivotal deterrence" – a strategy in which a third party takes on a "pivotal" role between adversaries, using its power and flexibility to make them fear the cost of nuclear escalation by manipulating threats and promises to prevent war breaking out (Crawford 2003). In contrast to mediation, "pivotal deterrence" does not rely on diplomatic cooperation with the adversaries and may include the use of force.

3　Similarly, Chari et al. (2007: 192) note that "the role of the United States in these events increased from crisis to crisis and became more explicit."

During recent crises, the U.S. was compelled to play this "pivotal role," as it pursued a balancing act of maintaining its strategic alliance with Pakistan while deepening its ties with India. In the Kargil crisis in 1999, for example, U.S. diplomacy served as a hedge between the two adversaries, altering their strategic calculations in ways that significantly contributed to a de-escalation of the "limited war." Third-party pivotal deterrence had an even greater impact in the 2001–2 crisis, when Washington successfully reassured Delhi that it would pressure Pakistan into taking action against militant outfits (Chakma 2012: 564–570). In both crises, the U.S. kept its impartiality as a "preponderant pivot" by diplomatically accommodating both parties at different times; asking Delhi to restrain their offensive and Islamabad to take action against militants at the same time; and by sharing intelligence strategically (Yusuf 2011: 20). However, Washington increasingly faced the double challenge of deep-rooted Pakistani mistrust toward the U.S. (which is perceived as a greater threat to its nuclear arsenal than India). Its gradual tilt toward India – which reached its peak with the signing of the 2008 U.S.-India nuclear agreement – and the refusal to grant Pakistan a similar deal exacerbated this challenge (Carranza 2007; Hoodbhoy 2012a). This dilemma became evident in U.S. pivotal diplomacy in the November 2008 Mumbai crisis (perceived by government officials as less dangerous than the previous two crises), in which Washington limited its role to that of an information broker and "gave unprecedented weight to sharing evidence with India and Pakistan" (Nayak and Krepon 2012: vii). The U.S. shift in strategic focus toward Asia suggests that Washington's policymakers will increasingly have to face such challenging dilemmas in the foreseeable future (Clinton 2011).

China's contribution to South Asia's nuclear security is often understood as being in opposition to the United States' role as a regional stabilizer. In June 2010, for example, Beijing struck a high-profile nuclear deal with Islamabad that was widely perceived as a counterweight to the U.S.-India agreement (Ahmed 2010). Similar to past transfers of nuclear materials and technology, the deal was primarily motivated by a willingness to balance India on the subcontinent (Joshi 2011; Paul 2003). Yet China's role in the triangular nuclear and strategic relationship is far less antagonistic, and Beijing remains aware of the inextricable linkages of its nuclear relations with India and Pakistan respectively. The trilateral structure entails complicated defense planning by all three countries (Chari et al. 2007: 219) and contributes to an unexpected and potentially destabilizing nuclear arms race in which India's nuclear calculation regarding China's behavior by far exceeds its deterrence requirements with respect to Pakistan, thus leading Islamabad to mobilize appropriate counterforces (Mitra 2011: 199; Dalton and Tandler 2012). However, China's pivotal role in convincing Pakistan to arrest key militants in the Mumbai crisis in November 2008 (Nayak and Krepon 2012: 61) indicates that its proximity

to and presence in South Asia are likely to increase its interest in de-escalating nuclear crises in the region – a goal that it shares with the U.S. (Doherty 2011).[4]

Secondly, India and Pakistan have learned from the experience of external intervention and gradually replaced dyadic deterrence with "trilateral compellence" strategies as their dominant nuclear stances (Basrur 2009: 90–93; Chari et al. 2007: 193–201).[5] In this dynamic aspect, a compellent state triggers a crisis with the trilateral objective of challenging its adversary *and* simultaneously pulling in third-party intervention for the purpose of de-escalation – with the nuclear arsenal serving as a quasi-blackmailing pressurizing medium. During the Kargil crisis in 1999, Islamabad anticipated external involvement in its planning, manipulating the "nuclear threat" to compel India to change its behavior and the U.S. to support Pakistan's strategic objectives (Tellis et al. 2001: 7–16). The planning of the Kargil intrusion thus relied on the assumption that "if things were to go wrong for Pakistan, the Western fear of a nuclear war would translate into their intervention to defuse the crisis" (Chakma 2012: 571). Just two years later, India also practiced "trilateral compellence" when it garnered greater U.S. involvement in de-escalation through mass military mobilization during "Operation Parakram" (Ganguly and Kraig 2005; Nayak and Krepon 2010). Delhi thus combined a direct compellence threat to Pakistan with "indirect pressure on Pakistan via the United States" (Basrur 2009: 90). The mere possibility of external intervention thus deeply shaped the rivals' nuclear doctrines and behavior.[6] Yet "contracting out" escalation control carries significant risks in situations when the third party is not able or willing to fulfill its expected role as the "principal agent for de-escalation in a nuclear environment" and when it "leads the principal parties to avoid institutionalizing bilateral mechanisms for escalation control" (Yusuf 2011: 20).

Finally, an additional number of external states have also become entangled in the nuclear security dynamics of South Asia, such as Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, which have all played a pivotal role in Indo-Pakistani tensions. Saudi Arabia, for example, has reportedly funded Pakistan's nuclear program and cushioned international sanctions as a result of nuclear tests (Borger 2010; Hoodbhoy 2012b).

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4   Nayak and Krepon (2012: 61) observe that "China's longtime tilt toward Pakistan and rivalry with India would confine Beijing's influence in a crisis to the Islamabad side of the equation. Should US ties to Pakistan worsen significantly while relations with India continue to improve, Beijing and Washington might find themselves collaborating to prompt Islamabad and New Delhi, respectively, to reduce tensions."

5   "Trilateral compellence" should not be confused with "triadic deterrence," a "situation when one state uses threats and/or punishments against another state to coerce it to prevent non-state actors from conducting attacks from its territory" (Atzili and Pearlman 2012: 301).

6   In fact, "America's diplomatic intervention during the past Indo-Pakistani crises not only gradually increased, it also profoundly influenced the strategic calculations of both India and Pakistan and helped to prevent those crises from going out of control. Without any American diplomatic intervention, any of the past Indo-Pakistani crises could have gone out of control and escalated to the nuclear level" (Chakma 2012: 555).

The Kingdom also allegedly entered into a covert agreement on nuclear cooperation with Pakistan that would allow it to purchase nuclear warheads upon request (Riedel 2008). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has also looked to its Sunni ally – and Chinese missile transfers; see Jansson (2012) – as a counterweight to possible threats posed by Shia Iran and Israel in case of relations deteriorating with the United States.

By contrast, Russia has historically assisted India's nuclear and strategic programs and regularly raised concerns over the status of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal (Bakshi 2006: 250–251; Singh 2012). In 1998, Japan reconsidered its commitment to non-proliferation after being taken by surprise by the alleged delivery of nuclear material to North Korea by the A. Q. Khan network. Accordingly, these interregional linkages have also influenced nuclear stability in South Asia and further underline the importance of understanding the phenomenon in the context of the broader geopolitical reconfiguration across Asia (Buzan 2012).

Nuclear Stability in a Complex Environment

Managing nuclear multipolarity in South Asia has proven to be a complicated task (Twomey 2011). The entanglement of militant non-state actors and extra-regional powers in India's and Pakistan's strategic calculations creates an even grimmer outlook and threatens to undermine the potentially stabilizing effects of nuclear deterrence. If we cannot deter nuclear militants or irrational adversaries, what alternative options remain for enabling peace and stability?

Existing multilateral control regimes need to adapt to the new globalized risks. Breaking up black markets, ensuring the security of nuclear material (as outlined in the Proliferation Security Initiative; see U.S. State Department (2009)), and encouraging regular and institutionalized dialogue between nuclear rivals may provide opportunities to address the challenges posed by complex South Asian security dynamics more effectively. "Responsible" actors also need to learn from similarly complex security environments, such as Israel and its surrounding neighborhood (Rid 2012). Positive incentives such as sharing nuclear expertise and technology should be used to induce Pakistan to confront militants located within its territory (Fair 2010). Deterrence stability in Pakistan should not just concentrate on securing Pakistan's nuclear capabilities but on helping Islamabad crack down on militants who plan to attack India (Perkovich 2012).

The U.S. and the international community could also play a role in reducing the tension, some of which existed before the nuclearization of the subcontinent. The spreading of nuclear weapons in the region is a result of ongoing Indo-Pakistani rivalry, not vice versa. As a result, encouraging a dialogue on pending disputes like the Line of Control or Kashmir could limit the resort to threats of nuclear escalation in order to obtain concessions. Without such incentives and diplomatic initiatives, the next regional crisis to erupt between South Asia's nuclear powers might spiral into a new type of conflict.

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