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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 17:6 June 2017**
UGC Approved List of Journals Serial Number 49042
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Stability in South Asia: The Significance of Nuclear Weapons and Non-State Actors

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Abstract

This paper will define South Asia as the states included in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India and Pakistan are the only two states in this regional subsystem that possess nuclear capabilities. This paper will use process tracing to determine how the development of nuclear weapons has stabilized the region over time. This phenomenon is best observed through the role nuclear weapons have played in the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir, which has been the main destabilizing conflict in the region.

Keywords: Stability of peace, significance of nuclear weapons, peace in South Asia, role of non-State players

Stability of Post-Cold War South Asia

The stability of post-Cold War South Asia is dependent on nuclear capabilities because the development of nuclear weapons in South Asia fosters stability by making the costs greater than the benefits of war, therein creating a mutual vulnerability that makes military victory impossible, and generating political consequences that force actors into rationality. While the existence of nuclear weapons is the main independent variable leading to the stability of South Asia, non-state actors and rising powers play a role in both the peacefulness and durability of stability in South Asia.

Focus of This Paper

This paper will define South Asia as the states included in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the

Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India and Pakistan are the only two states in this regional subsystem that possess nuclear capabilities. This paper will use process tracing to determine how the development of nuclear weapons has stabilized the region over time. This phenomenon is best observed through the role nuclear weapons have played in the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir, which has been the main destabilizing conflict in the region.

Conflict over Kashmir, Two Super Powers and Power Loyalties

Kashmir has been under dispute since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The first war between Pakistan and India over Kashmir occurred in 1948. The United Nations tried and failed to resolve the crisis. The war ended with an inconclusive cease fire and India holding two thirds of Kashmir (Shakoor 1997, 77). At that time, neither India nor Pakistan possessed nuclear capabilities. Out of disappointment in the outcome of the conflict, Pakistan decided to side with the United States in the highly polarized international system. India then joined the Soviet Union as a reaction to Pakistan's new alignment (Shakoor 1997, 77). Therefore, the two major superpowers were drawn into South Asia by invitation and not by independent assertion.

Polarity has not been a variable of great significance in South Asia because while Pakistan and India, as the main contributors to conflict in the region, were at one time aligned with opposing powers, this soon became irrelevant. In 1955 India and the Soviet Union described themselves as allies in the struggle for world peace and had a well-developed relationship. Conversely, Pakistan was aligned with the United States but was struggling to keep the alliance strong. The United States did not share much of the animosity Pakistan held against India and instead viewed India as a bulwark against communism. By 1958 India was receiving aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union (Shakoor 1997, 77). Thus, power loyalties did not play a significant role in the Cold War era, and this pattern has continued into the post- Cold War era.

Wars before India and Pakistan Developed Nuclear Capabilities and the Role of Super Powers

The second Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir occurred in 1965, when both India and Pakistan had yet to develop nuclear capabilities. This war was initiated by Pakistani insurgents in

Kashmir and resulted in a similar outcome as the first. However, this time there was a formal treaty signed by India and Pakistan, facilitated by the Soviet Union in support of India (Shakoor 1997, 78). Conversely, the United States declared complete neutrality at that time and even went so far as to completely cut off aid to both India and Pakistan. The United States put in no effort to deter Pakistan and India from engaging in war, nor did it impose an arms embargo on either side (Kumar 2006, 611).

No Major Conventional Wars after Developing Nuclear Capabilities

While the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war left room for dispute, there has been no conventional army clashes since then. This is due to both India and Pakistan developing nuclear capabilities. The first official nuclear tests by both countries occurred in 1998, three weeks apart from each other, while prep began years in advance (Kristensen and Norris 2015). For example, in 1989 there was a violent uprising in Kashmir, which increased tensions in relations between India and Pakistan. By 1990 the United States became diplomatically involved before further violent development, and prevented the tension from turning into full-fledged war (Shakoor 1997, 80). It may be easy to conclude that it was simply the involvement of the United States that deterred India and Pakistan from going to war over Kashmir. However, as observed in its response to the 1965 conflict, it is unlikely that the United States would have gotten involved if not for the newly developed nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan. In addition, Key (1998, 91) states that both India and Pakistan were resistant to outside pressure, especially from Washington because neither party was prepared to trust "the good intentions of outsiders". Therefore, it was the mutual nuclear capability that changed the pattern of conflict in South Asia and resulted in the lack of violence that maintained stability in the region.

Continuing Hostile Posture for the Last 50 Years- Mutual Vulnerability Prohibits Total War

Pakistan and India have maintained a hostile posture along the border and in Kashmir for the last fifty years (Key 1998, 89). This has not resulted in war since the development of nuclear weapons because the nuclear capability of both parties has raised the stakes of conventional conflict (Key 1998, 90), therefore making the possible costs greater than the benefits. This is because the existence of nuclear capability creates a mutual vulnerability that makes military

victory impossible. Both Pakistan and India are aware that military victory is not possible in the sense that even if one state were to recover faster than the other, the victory would not be meaningful because in nuclear war no state would be better off fighting than had it not fought at all (Jervis 1986, 692).

Seeking Non-military Victory

Conversely, it may be argued that while military, or nuclear, victory is impossible, a non-military victory is possible between states with nuclear capabilities. This logic asserts that states will be able to attack the other conventionally because each knows that the other will not be willing to escalate the war to a nuclear level. Historically, Pakistan has been the instigator of the Indo-Pakistani conflicts, yet no such moves have been made since the development of nuclear capabilities. For example, in 1965 Pakistan decided it was ample time to begin guerilla warfare with the help of Kashmiri recruits formally trained by the Pakistani Army in Kashmir even though it understood, "India's superiority in terms of military strength had grown to such an extent that Pakistan could bear no comparison to it and could not compete with India even if it so wished" (Shakoor 1997, 80). Therefore, Pakistan was willing to risk fighting a war in which it knew it was conventionally weaker before the development of nuclear weapons, but not after both states had nuclear capabilities. In other words, Pakistan fears the capability of nuclear weapons more than it fears India. This debunks the argument of non-military victory as a working nuclear logic in the subsystem of South Asia.

Avoiding Escalation

However, one key concern in the conversation on nuclear weapons is escalation. Posen argues that

> "Escalation has generally been conceived of as either a rational policy choice, in which a leadership decides to preempt or to escalate in the face of a conventional defeat, or as an accident, the result of mechanical failure, unauthorized use, or insanity. But escalation arising out of the normal conduct of intense conventional conflict falls between these two categories: it is neither a purposeful act of policy nor an accident. What might be called 'inadvertent escalation' is rather the unintended consequence of a decision to fight a conventional war" (Posen 1982, 29).

Here, Posen is asserting that actors that hold nuclear capabilities will only be boundedly rational, and therefore use nuclear forces as a miscalculation due to offense-defense indistinguishability and the fog of war in conventional warfare. This does not apply to the South Asian case because India and Pakistan have historically avoided conventional warfare. For example, both India and Pakistan have pursued "non-weaponized deterrence" (Key 1998, 91).

This is a strategy that entails no testing, assembly, or actual deployment of weapons. Nevertheless, both are "de facto nuclear powers," and can assemble and deploy nuclear weapons in a short time (Key 1998, 92).

Therefore, since Pakistan and India are not only avoiding conventional warfare, but also avoiding direct signaling of nuclear power, it rests that both Pakistan and India believe that its own capability is more important than its credibility and this allows the system to remain stable. This is so because nuclear threats do not have to be highly credible to be effective. Even a very slight chance that a confrontation or provocation could lead to nuclear war is enough to deter rational opponents. In addition, as seen in this case, states do not need to threaten to immediately launch a full-scale nuclear attack on the other to deter because the mere existence of nuclear capability reduces the necessity of credibility (Jervis 1986, 697).

Arms Racing and Dangerous Vertical Nuclear Proliferation

Similarly, the importance of capability may result in arms racing and nuclear proliferation. For example, Jervis states that although “crises are quite rare, the crucial functions of demonstrating seriousness and credibility have to some extent devolved to arms procurement” (Jervis 1986, 698). In addition, Kumar states that one of the main strategies of the United States in South Asia is to avert a nuclear arms race in the region (2006, 612). This is a rational since Kristenson and Norris state that while Pakistan has about 120 nuclear warheads now (compared to India’s 110), it could potentially have 220 to 250 by 2025, making it the world’s fifth largest nuclear weapon state (2015, 1). This vertical nuclear proliferation may affect the stability of the region because while India also continues to develop nuclear weapons, it is not doing so at Pakistan’s pace, and it is not sharing the details of its program. Therefore, if India begins to become fearful of Pakistan becoming an international nuclear power, India may begin looking

more boundedly rational. India may then find it necessary to fight a conventional war due to its confidence in its conventional abilities if Pakistan threatens Kashmir again. Therefore, vertical nuclear proliferation in the region will make the nuclear supported peace no longer durable.

However, vertical nuclear proliferation will not necessarily result in the escalation of conventional war to nuclear war, because South Asia is determined to rationally avoid conventional war and the existence of nuclear capabilities enhance stability by lowering crises due to the increased caution of state actors. India and Pakistan have become more cautious since the development of respective nuclear capabilities because both states are comfortable with the status quo of the region and would not risk losing what each holds to increase territory or influence. It is not worth it for mutually capable states such as these to risk changing the status quo (Jervis 1986, 695). Therefore, it is unlikely that Pakistan will conventionally attempt to take Kashmir yet again.

India as Regional Power Challenged by Non-state Actors

The current status quo of South Asia maintains that India is the regional power, with the strongest economy, most stable government, and strongest conventional military (Key 1998, 89). By the end of the Cold War the United States recognized India as a regional power and chose to leave it be, as long as there was no Indo-Pakistani crisis (Shakoor 2006, 80). However, although India reigns as regional power, Pakistan uses nuclear capability, and more importantly, non-state actors to counter India's overwhelming conventional military superiority (Key 1998, 92).

While India remains the regional power, and is rising in the international system as well due to its economic and military growth, and political stability, Pakistan remains relevant. Although considered a "failed state" due to its economic deterioration and political and economic instability caused by a ruling military allowed by the elite because of opportunism and collusion (Zaidi 2008, 10), Pakistan still manages to threaten India and worry South Asia and the international system because of its nuclear capability. With its military playing a strong role in the governance of Pakistan, Pakistan has been following the trajectory of aggressive nuclear proliferation. India, though not as aggressive, has been doing the same, but with its focus on China. Non-state actors act as a confounding variable that increases the danger of nuclear

proliferation and play a destabilizing role in the region, undermining the stability that nuclear weapon capability brought when it first appeared on the scene.

Non-State, Armed Islamic Groups as an Instrument of Foreign Policy

Not only has Pakistan been acting reactionarily to India's nuclear program, which has grown to deter China (Key 1998, 92), but Pakistan has also allowed non-state, armed Islamic groups as an instrument of foreign policy (Key 1998, 90). For example, in 2001 India's Parliament was attacked by terrorist groups allegedly used as proxies by Pakistan's intelligence service (ISI). Pakistani terrorists also launched attacks in Mumbai, India in 2008, killing 164 people. Finally, in September of 2016 Pakistani terrorists assaulted the Indian garrison of Uri in Kashmir, killing 19 (M.F. 2017). These attacks have affected the entire region of South Asia. For example, in a press conference one month after the attack in Kashmir, Aitzaz Ahsan, a politician from Punjab, stated that "if Pakistan does not restrict their non-state actors and something bad happens, Bangladesh and Afghanistan will not speak to them, and Bhutan and Nepal will begin supporting India" (Dawn 2016). Non-state actors have a highly destabilizing and negative effect on the durability of peace in the South Asian subsystem.

Due to the most recent attacks, there has been a shift in India's policy toward Pakistan. As opposed to its usual defensive posture, this time the Indian government responded by "authorizing 'surgical strikes' along the frontier, targeted at 'terrorist launch pads' and 'those protecting them'" (M.F. 2017). This is in part because India's response to the onslaught of 2001 was a failure. By the time India's Strike Corps had mobilized and positioned on the frontier, Pakistan had already bulked up its defenses, therefore raising both the costs of the incursion, and the risk that conventional conflict would soon escalate to a nuclear level (M.F. 2017). Thus, no action was initiated by India and it has now formed a new response plan as a result of the threat Pakistan is projecting through both its nuclear proliferation and non-state actors.

India's Strategy of "Cold Start"

India is currently pursuing a strategy entitled "Cold Start". Cold Start aims to make India more prepared for conventional war if Pakistani terrorists do strike India again by having nimbler, integrated units stationed closer to the border to allow India to inflict significant harm

before international powers demand a ceasefire (M.F. 2017). This is a departure from the early post-Cold War defensive avoidance of conventional war and has many critics. This shift in policy suggests that the presence and activity of non-state actors allegedly sponsored by Pakistan has made India boundedly rational, leaving it vulnerable to inadvertent war. Per M.F., Ladwig states that if India's Cold Start plan is implemented as it is meant to be, after a terrorist attack prepared with ISI's knowledge, India's response would lack the element of surprise. This makes Cold Start a weak deterrent. In addition, the risk of overreaction on Pakistan's side is heightened by India's secretive behavior, and Pakistani officials have already threatened to use nuclear weapons, should India put Cold Start into action (2017). Therefore, the increased presence of Pakistani non-state actors in India acts as a destabilizing independent variable in the South Asian subsystem.

India, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Non-state Actors

Conversely, in 1998, Key wrote that under the "current conditions" (before the first terrorist attack in India in 2001) nuclear proliferation in the Indian subcontinent could not be reversed. The futility of such efforts was evident in India's continued refusal to sign either the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Officials in New Delhi insisted that these treaties were flawed because they failed to eliminate all nuclear weapons and proscribe all testing. Taking advantage of India's posturing, Pakistan guaranteed the nuclear stalemate in the region by pledging to sign both treaties only if India did so (Key 1998, 92). Therefore, since it is highly unlikely that nuclear proliferation will end in the near future, peacefulness will only be durable if Pakistan keeps its non-state actors out of India. Nuclear deterrence has proven itself capable of maintaining stability in South Asia, but the appearance of non-state actors skews the rationality of India, leaving it boundedly rational and more liable to start conventional war.

As a result of the growing threat of international terrorism and the increased nuclearization of South Asia, the region has assumed a new significance in American strategy (Kumar 2006, 605). As the international superpower, the United States is uniquely positioned to get involved; however, to do so effectively it must also accept the limits of its influence in South Asia (Key 1998, 98). For example, it is risky to attempt to place increased constraints on

Pakistan because a decline in its ability to launch a nuclear strike may compel it to use nuclear weapons early on in a conflict rather than risk losing them (Key 1998, 99).

Therefore, the American strategy in post-Cold War South Asia includes combating terrorism and averting nuclear proliferation (Kumar 2006, 612). American interests have grown deeper not only for international security reasons, but also because India has become an economic priority (Kumar 2006, 615). Therefore, the goal of American policy should be to facilitate a permanent disengagement between India and Pakistan that would allow each to turn to rewarding economic relationships with states outside the region instead (Key 1998, 98). While the effectiveness of this policy depends on the willingness of India and Pakistan to relinquish decades old conflict and the focus of any peace talks between the two states should focus on non-state actors and proliferation, the role of the international economy has become increasingly important where South Asian peacefulness and durability is concerned.

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Acknowledgement

My thanks are due to Professor Joel H. Westra, Calvin College for his helpful guidance in writing this paper.

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