BOOK REVIEW

Kaku no Risuku to Chiiki Hunso: Indo Pakisutan Hunso no Kiki to Antei [Nuclear Risk and Regional Rivalry: Crises and Stability in the India–Pakistan Rivalry], by Masahiro Kurita, Tokyo, Keiso Shobo, 2018, 288 pp., 4950 JPY (including tax) (hardback), ISBN 978-4-326-30270-3

India and Pakistan have been at odds with each other since their founding in 1947. The two countries have fought three all-out wars and now face in a nuclear confrontation. Has the advent of nuclear weapons changed the nature of the India-Pakistan (hereinafter referred to as Indo-Pak) conflict? Will the Indo-Pak conflict develop into nuclear war? This book boldly challenges the conventional wisdom of these questions and argues that both the significance and danger of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pak context should not be overestimated.

The author starts with his concern over the tendency to believe that regional conflicts between emerging nuclear powers are more unstable and dangerous than they really are, especially in contrast to the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, where nuclear weapons brought about a “long peace.” The author points out that the Indo-Pak conflict is becoming a symbolic case that has formed this type of negative image, which is ultimately projected onto other cases, such as that of North Korea.

Previous studies on the Indo-Pak conflict after the possession of nuclear weapons have generally pointed out two phenomena. The first is the “stability-instability paradox” in which the suppression of large-scale wars by mutual nuclear deterrence promotes low-intensity conflicts. The second is the “competition for escalation dominance,” in which both sides in a nuclear deterrence regime compete for the possibility of initiating a limited war in terms of nuclear and conventional forces in order to improve deterrence and coerce the other side. In many cases in the Indo-Pak relations, the race takes place as a continuous phenomenon. At first, Pakistan, a revisionist state that no longer fears nuclear retaliation from India, intensified insurgency and terrorism, i.e., proxy wars, in the Indian side of Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir – J&K). When India began to pursue the option of starting limited conventional war as to not induce nuclear retaliation from Pakistan, Islamabad then sought an option of limited nuclear war through the use of tactical nuclear weapons to deter Delhi. Accordingly, this sequence would lead to an exchange of nuclear attacks and increase the risk of all-out nuclear war.

However, the author questions whether the conventional wisdom accurately captures the reality of Indo-Pak relations. In order to examine the validity of the “stability-instability paradox,” the author investigates whether Pakistan has aimed at changing the status quo due to its acquisition of nuclear weapons based on two case studies – insurgency and terrorism in Kashmir on the Indian side, and the Kargil conflict in 1999. The number of incidents and casualties of violence in the J&K region, which has been described as Pakistan’s “proxy war,” has increased sharply since 1989–90, which coincides with the time when Pakistan effectively became a nuclear power. However, there is no evidence to prove causality between the

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1 This book review is a revised version based on the original work in Japanese, T. Ito, “Kurita Masahiro cho ‘Kaku no risuku’to chiikifunso: indo-pakisutan funso no kiki to antei,” Kokusai Anzenhosho, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2019): 102–106.

2 Indian government redefined the status of Jammu and Kashmir from a single state to two union territories, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019, enacted in in October 2019.
increased violence and Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear deterrence capabilities. The author argues that it should be seen as the result of India’s domestic politics. Looking at the period after 1998, when both countries promulgated their possession of nuclear weapons, we find that violence in J&K peaked in 2001–02 and declined sharply afterward. This indicates that the situation has not always destabilized even after Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. Outside of the J&K region, there have been no major terrorist attacks of significant magnitude attributed to Pakistan except for the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008. All in all, it is argued that this kind of proxy war by Pakistan has been ongoing since the independence of Pakistan, and was neither initiated nor promoted by the presence of nuclear weapons.

The Kargil conflict, which began when Pakistani paramilitary forces and militants invaded Kargil in the Indian-controlled state of J&K, is also not a consequence of mutual possession of nuclear weapons. For the author, it was another case of a traditional local invasion by Pakistan. Furthermore, while Pakistan was counterattacked by the Indian military, including its air force, it kept its military from being directly involved in the invasion and avoided any counter-escalation. This means that the Pakistani side has not gained sufficient confidence through its possession of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the fact that Indian counter-attacks did not cross the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir and were relatively restrained suggests that India was afraid of Pakistan’s use of nuclear weapons.

This book then examines the “competition for escalation dominance” model at both the nuclear and conventional warfare levels. At the nuclear level, although Pakistan has introduced tactical nuclear weapons since the 2010s with the goal of achieving full-fledged deterrence against India, the prevailing position in Pakistan has always been that nuclear war is impossible even in a limited form. In India, there have been debates on reviewing nuclear doctrines based on the non-first-use principle and mass retaliation. In reality, there has been no movement to pursue a posture enabling a limited nuclear war so far.

The same is true at the conventional warfare level. After the 2001–02 border confrontation, when India was unable to fight back against terrorist attacks from Pakistan, India replaced the Sundarji doctrine, which supported a large-scale counter-offense, with the Cold Start doctrine which embraced fighting a limited conventional war. Nevertheless, the Cold Start doctrine was not domestically supported and was abandoned soon after. It is said that India is now pursuing a proactive strategy for fighting a large-scale conventional warfare in a prompt manner. Meanwhile, the less powerful Pakistan is certainly seeking to deter India’s conventional forces with nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, Islamabad is not pursuing a posture of actually using tactical nuclear weapons, therefore the significance of conventional forces has not decreased. Pakistan’s traditional doctrine of offensive defense also remains unchanged even after the possession of nuclear weapons. In other words, there is no competition for dominating escalation, neither at the nuclear level, nor at the level of conventional warfare.

Furthermore, the author believes that the risk of nuclear war between India and Pakistan is not as great as previous studies have pointed out. Thus, he concludes that the presence of nuclear weapons in the conflict should not be overestimated. The greatest significance of this book lies in this argument which, from the perspective of nuclear warfare, theoretically refutes that the Indo-Pak conflict is seen as more dangerous than other nuclear confrontations. In particular, he sharply criticizes the conventional wisdom originating in the U.S.-Soviet relationship during the Cold War, namely the “stability-instability paradox” and the “competition for escalation dominance,” that have been consciously or unconsciously applied by previous studies of the Indo-Pak conflict. It is significant that the author, who has meticulously investigated nuclear deterrence theory and nuclear-related issues, has insisted on the need to pay attention to the characteristics inherent in regional conflicts, rather than relying
on a reductive approach of nuclear weapons or deterrence. He points out that the Indo-Pak conflict actually originated in the 1947 secession, not after the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Even the Kashmir issue, which is the biggest problem of the bilateral conflict, needs to be examined in terms of its continuity from before the nuclear age.

That being said, from the standpoint of a reviewer who has studied the Kashmir issue from the perspective of ethnic and political conflicts between India and Pakistan, there is a slight disagreement over the author’s understanding of the “common sense” of previous studies. This is due to the fact that, at least from the perspective of South Asian area experts, it is not common knowledge that Pakistan’s actions to change the status quo are entirely attributable to nuclear weapons. Many scholars of the region, both inside and outside Japan, have viewed the Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir as a conflict over identity and territory that has been ongoing since the partition. It is common knowledge in South Asian area studies that the weaker Pakistan attempted various types of wars, especially after losing East Pakistan in 1971. As Islamabad was subsequently spurred to support terrorism, and the Indian central government violated the autonomy of J&K and suppressed its people, the situation between the two countries became unstable in the late 1980s.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this may be due to the difference in perspectives between disciplinary studies of nuclear deterrence and area studies experts. In other words, this book may shed light on an issue to which researchers of the South Asian region have not been able to theoretically contribute. In actuality, this review completely agrees with the author that the role of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pak conflict should not be overestimated.

However, the author’s description of when and why nuclear weapons appeared in the Indo-Pak conflict and how they functioned was not clear to the reviewer. For instance, the author places importance on Pakistan’s retention of nuclear deterrence at the end of the 1980s (pages 56–57), and denies a causal relationship between nuclear deterrence and Pakistan’s actions to change the status quo. It cites the fact that Pakistan, unlike in 1965, did not launch a large-scale invasion campaign during the “complex crisis” that accompanied the deterioration of the situation in the J&K region in 1990 (page 79). The author supports the claim of Pervez Musharraf, the former president of Pakistan, and other Pakistani officials that the country’s nuclear weapons had not been operationalized even at the time of the Kargil conflict in 1999. Placing importance on the fact that Pakistan’s major policy makers did not issue any threat of nuclear use during the Kargil conflict, he concludes that Islamabad was not trying to prevent Delhi from taking military action and escalating conventional warfare with nuclear weapons (pp. 91–92).

This proposition seems different from the perception of the then Clinton administration. If the operationalization of Pakistan’s nuclear capability had been established by the time of the subsequent border confrontation in 2001–02 (page 115), should Pakistan’s restrain in the 1990s be explained as an action prior to its possession of nuclear weapons (page 115)? Moreover, it might have been insightful if this book examined in more detail cases demonstrating Pakistani aims for challenging the status quo after acquiring nuclear weapons, such as the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, as well as the May 2002 attack on the Army cantonment in Kaluchak of the J&K.

In this regard, the author’s argument that invalidates the “stability-instability paradox” is also questionable. He claims that, aside from the 2008 Mumbai attacks that brought the Indo-Pak peace process to a halt, there have been no Pakistani terrorist incidents of the same magnitude on the Indian mainland or in J&K. However, in recent years, there have been a series of serious attacks that shook the whole nation of India, including attacks on the Indian Air Force base in the Punjab State and the Army base in Kashmir in 2016, as well as the 2019 attack on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Pulwama of J&K. If the goal of these
recent terrorist attacks was to change India’s policy toward Pakistan, then those incidents should be seen as having the same effect, though on the different scales, as those in 2001–02 and 2008.

As for the Indian response, it may be slightly unreasonable to discuss India’s nuclear strategy against Pakistan in isolation since India’s nuclear strategy is also directed against China. It is also worth noting that India’s policy toward Pakistan is strongly influenced by differences in the Indian political leadership and domestic politics because of its excessively embedded civilian control in India's democratic system. Manmohan Singh’s Nationalist Congress Party government rejected the Cold Start Doctrine and, in “Non-Alignment 2.0” which is not mentioned in this book, stated that the policy of large-scale occupation of Pakistani territory was no longer a valid proposition. In fact, the Singh administration did not even order military mobilization in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attack. However, the self-proclaimed Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party government announced that it had carried out a “cross-border attack” on the Pakistani side of Kashmir in response to the 2016 attacks. In February 2019, just before the general elections, India crossed the threshold even further, carrying out the first airstrikes on the “mainland” of Pakistan after the Third Indo-Pak War. In this situation, the Modi administration, which had struggled in the election, had the intention of appealing to the Indian general public as a “Strong India” to arouse nationalism.

Pakistan responded with a counterattack that resulted in an aerial battle, in which one Indian fighter jet was shot down and its pilot detained. According to media reports, the Indian side threatened to launch missiles against Pakistan, while Pakistan took a stance to prepare resisting India’s threats. Consequently, the U.S. and other countries strongly urged Pakistan to release the pilot as soon as possible, and the situation was brought under control. This case may indicate that even if nuclear weapons have not changed the nature of the Indo-Pak conflict, it may not be possible to deny the likelihood of escalation of the conflict. It might be also necessary to focus on and view the role of crisis management by the international community or other major countries which fear escalation of the conflict, as a major factor in preventing such escalation.

All in all, this book provides fruitful insights for deeply understanding and thinking about the relationship between regional conflicts and nuclear weapons. It is certainly a thought-provoking, must-read for scholars and students of both nuclear issues and South Asian regional studies.

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