India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine four crises that took place between India and Pakistan, in the period in which they were declared nuclear powers. It shows that by combining threats and reassurance, Indian leaders sought to avert nuclear use, while deriving strategic and diplomatic gains from the presence of nuclear weapons. While scholars differ as to whether India-Pakistan crises should be termed “nuclear crises”, this paper asks instead how one state – India – behaves during crises, simultaneously drawing attention to, and downplaying its nuclear dimensions. The first section of the paper explains the role of reassurance in the complex game of deterrence. The second section provides a brief summary of the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship. The four crises are analyzed in the third section. Each crisis is first summarized, and the words and deeds that New Delhi chose to signal reassurance are highlighted. The fourth and final section evaluates whether the nuclear danger can be thus managed through the calibration of threat and reassurance. It identifies three factors that impede signals of reassurance, and cautions that the balance between threat and reassurance is too delicate to be relied on to keep the peace between India and Pakistan.

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Introduction

The relationship between India and Pakistan is characterized by intense crises at irregular intervals. Since the late 1980s, there has been a risk that any serious crisis could terminate in a nuclear exchange. Scholars have examined the probability, and the potential costs of, such an exchange. They have focused on the threats issued, before and during the crises. They have examined the roles of the United States and other major powers in the crises. The main debate has centered on whether nuclear weapons caused crises, or whether they helped resolve crises between India and Pakistan.

In fact, nuclear optimists and nuclear pessimists differ on what a nuclear crisis is. Consequently, it is difficult to answer the question: “Why have there been no nuclear crises between India and Pakistan?” This paper instead asks a different question: how one state – India – behaves during crises. It finds that although analyses of crises are more likely to discuss signals of threat, signals of reassurance during crises are vital to avoiding a nuclear exchange. At the same time, it also finds three factors that impede...
signals of reassurance, and cautions that the balance between threat and reassurance may be too delicate to keep the peace between India and Pakistan.

This paper will examine four crises that took place between India and Pakistan after the formal declaration of nuclear possession by the two countries in 1998. While threats are readily perceived, the role of reassurance in these crises has been somewhat neglected. The paper reveals the ways in which India has reassured Pakistan. By reassurance, I mean actions and statements by political and military leaders intended to signal that the country’s response is rational, motivated by strategic – rather than partisan – objectives, and limited in time and geographic scope. Most importantly, Indian signals heighten the adversary’s assumption that nuclear weapons will not be used.

All four crises had the potential to escalate to the level of nuclear use. They fit the definition of nuclear crisis advanced by Richard Betts: a crisis including “any official suggestion that nuclear weapons may be used”. These official suggestions are of two types. The first type includes declarations or hints, through public statements, diplomatic channels, or deliberate leaks. The second type includes actions such as observable preparations, and the exercising of nuclear capabilities beyond normal peacetime status (Betts 1987, 6).

The first section of the paper explains the role of reassurance in the complex game of deterrence. The second section provides a brief summary of the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship. The four crises are analyzed in the third section. Each crisis is first summarized, and the words and deeds that New Delhi chose to signal reassurance are highlighted. The fourth and final section evaluates whether the nuclear danger can be thus managed, through the calibration of threat and reassurance.

Reassurance: Its Role in Deterrence

When crises occur between two states that possess nuclear weapons, nuclear pessimists focus on causation, on the role of nuclear weapons in facilitating or igniting crises. For example, Pervez Hoodbhoy describes the Kargil conflict as the first war that was caused by nuclear weapons (Hoodbhoy 2013, 73). Paul Kapur presents Kargil as evidence of Pakistani leaders’ faith in the “insulating effects” of nuclear weapons. He writes: “After the 1998 Indo-Pakistan nuclear tests, Pakistani leaders believed that their overt nuclear capacity would provide them with more robust deterrence than their earlier undeclared capability had done” (Kapur 2006, 40). While Kapur terms this process nuclear “emboldenment”, Asad Durrani, former Director-General of Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence, describes it as a belief in “nuclear immunity” (Dulat, Durrani, and Sinha 2018, 134).

Nuclear pessimists hold organizational problems (inherent to nuclear arsenals) and political structures (specific to countries) responsible for crises. Scott Sagan, for example, points out that military biases towards fast and pre-emptive action are magnified in a polity such as Pakistan, which has weak civilian control of the military and inadequate technical safeguards against unauthorized use (Sagan and Waltz 2003).

While pessimists focus on the causal link between nuclear weapons and crises, nuclear optimists focus on crisis resolution. They point out that a nuclear exchange has not yet occurred in South Asia, and give the credit to deterrence (Hagerty 2008; Sagan and Waltz 2003). For example, Rajesh Rajagopalan claims that India’s fear of nuclear escalation was the main factor in its restraint during the Kargil crisis, which ultimately led to its resolution (Rajagopalan 2008). Nuclear optimists attribute crises to
domestic political causes. For example, civil-military dynamics and misperceptions within Pakistan, rather than nuclear acquisition, are said to have motivated the Pakistani military to occupy the Kargil heights in 1999 (Lavoy 2009; Pegahi 2018).

Mark Bell and Julia Macdonald argue that there is no scholarly consensus on the likelihood of nuclear use – and therefore on the question of whether nuclear weapons prevent or aggravate conflict – because different nuclear crises operate according to different logics (Bell and Macdonald 2019). Focusing on the causes and resolution of crises obscures the events that take place during the crisis. This paper turns its attention to the processes under way as a crisis progresses, rather than engage in the debate on the role of nuclear weapons in triggering conflict. It investigates the methods by which India seeks to ensure that crises are terminated with minimal risk of a nuclear exchange, while also extracting the maximum geopolitical benefit for itself. These methods include both threat and reassurance.

Nuclear deterrence depends on the credibility of a state’s retaliation. Credibility, in turn, rests on both capability and intention. While capability refers to nuclear weapons hardware and their command and control systems, intention is a complex psychological phenomenon. The government must signal that it is able and willing to respond to certain threats (but not others) with nuclear weapon use. Thus, intention has two components that seem at first glance to be at cross-purposes. First, intention must convey threat. The government must convince the adversary that it will carry out a nuclear strike if so-called “red lines” are crossed. Second, signals of intention must also reassure: that unless and until those lines are crossed, nuclear weapons will be kept in reserve, and used only as a deterrent. They will not be brandished in minor crises, in anger or vengeance, or deployed for partisan political purposes.

Why is reassurance important for deterrence? Firstly, if messaging consisted only of threats, the adversary would have little incentive to stay its hand. If Pakistan believed that India was capable of launching a full-scale attack (potentially including a nuclear strike) at the slightest provocation, it would make sense to launch a Pakistani strike first. This would make deterrence dangerously unstable. Deterrence requires all parties involved to maintain the right balance between threat and reassurance.

Secondly, parties other than the adversary also need to be reassured. In general, the international norm of nuclear non-use privileges deterrence as a last resort, and frowns on
attempts at nuclear compellence. As Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd Sechser put it, a state
that attempted overt compellence would “... provoke an international backlash, potentially
triggering economic sanctions and international isolation, encouraging nuclear prolifera-
tion, and provoking other states to align against it” (Fuhrmann and Sechser 2013, 177).
India is eager to brand itself as a responsible holder of nuclear weapons, and therefore is
particularly concerned with portraying its nuclear arsenal as a pure deterrent.

How is reassurance conveyed to the adversary? Reassuring signals include both
declaratory statements and actions on the ground. Statements are made by elected
leaders or military authorities. At times, important individuals outside the chain of
command can also make these statements. Actions include troop deployments and
withdrawals, visible changes in alert status, the movement of conventional and nuclear
weapons, and actual kinetic operations carried out by troops.

The existence of democratic institutions can contribute to reassurance. Although the
1998 tests were condemned by all major powers, as well as the bulk of membership of
the United Nations, the world eventually came to accept India’s possession of nuclear
weapons. This can be seen in the 2005 description of India as a “responsible state” in
the India-United States joint statement, which was seen as a recognition of India as a de
facto Nuclear Weapon State. India is even being considered for membership of the
Nuclear Suppliers Group. This acceptance has come about partly as a result of the
emphasis that India placed on the strength of its democracy and civilian control of
nuclear assets (Hayes 2009; Sasikumar 2007). However, certain features of India’s
democracy could weaken reassurance: the need for political parties to appear strong
and decisive (especially around elections); the rising salience of security issues among
the attentive public; and the growth of Hindu majority nationalism, which leads to
tension with the Muslim minority, and with Pakistan.

“Reassurance” is used in the security studies literature to describe actions that states
take to reduce their adversaries’ apprehension of being attacked. Evan Braden
Montgomery, writing about the security dilemma in general, defines reassurance as
the actions taken by a “benign state” to reveal its motives to its adversaries, “by taking
actions that decrease its ability to defeat them in the event of a conflict” (Montgomery
2006, 151). In this paper, it is not assumed that India is a benign power, which is trying
to signal that Pakistan is not a target. The paper makes no assumptions about Indian
motivations, other than the desire to avoid nuclear war. Michael Howard uses the term
“reassurance” as distinct from nuclear deterrence, possibly even opposed to it. He
describes the presence of US conventional forces in Europe during the Cold War as
providing reassurance to the European allies (Howard 1982–1983). In this paper,
reassurance strategies are targeting not Indian citizens or allies, but decision-makers
in Pakistan.

In the literature on nuclear weapons, reassurance has a more specific meaning. For
instance, Janne Nolan states that reassurance was the goal of the US nuclear policy
under the Carter administration – in contrast to earlier policies that emphasized launch
on warning (Nolan 2000, 13). Here, it is clear that reassurance aims merely to prevent
the adversary (the Soviet Union) from over-reacting.

Reassurance and restraint are sometimes used as synonyms. In this paper,
reassurance refers to a type of crisis behavior, that manifests itself once a crisis is
under way. Restraint is a broader, more general strategy. India’s response to the
2006 bombing is an example of restraint. In July 2006, a series of crude bombs went off on packed local trains in India’s commercial hub, Mumbai, killing over two hundred people. The finger of suspicion pointed immediately to Lashkar-e-Taiba – a group historically supported by the Pakistani state. In the aftermath of the bombing, India suspended talks with Pakistan, but resisted pressure to take military action (Anon 2006). In 2013, two soldiers were attacked on the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border between India and Pakistan. Again, the government eschewed a military response, in spite of stringent calls to action from opposition parties (Sharma 2013).

Reassurance can also be conceptually distinguished from de-escalation. Reassurance, for the purposes of this analysis, refers to signals that nuclear weapons will not be used. De-escalation refers to any move during a crisis, referring to conventional, nuclear, and even non-military sparring, that indicates a desire to lower tensions. Thus, reassurance is a subset of de-escalation. However, in practice, conventional de-escalation during a crisis can be a signal of nuclear reassurance. An example, discussed below, was India’s choice to restrict conventional military operations during the Kargil War.

The India–Pakistan Deterrence Relationship

The three main factors at play in the strategic relationship between India and Pakistan are nuclear weapons, terrorism, and the concerns of the international community – specifically the United States. In May 1998, India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices and declared themselves as Nuclear Weapon States. However, both countries possessed the ability to deliver nuclear weapons on each other’s territory since the late 1980s. The 1998 tests caused great concern in the international community, because the two countries have several intense and unresolved conflicts, and share a contested border.

Crises between India and Pakistan continued to occur after 1998, attracting the concern of scholars and policy-makers. These crises have been explained by the stability-instability paradox. This concept recognizes that while the possibility of full-scale war is eliminated by the desire to avoid a nuclear exchange, there are strong incentives for sub-strategic operations (e.g. sponsoring militant attacks and launching limited military operations). In fact, the more credible deterrence becomes at the strategic level, the more violence we would expect at the sub-strategic level (Ganguly 1995; Tellis 1997). These violent operations would be carried out by the revisionist power – in this case, Pakistan – banking on the deterrent power of its nuclear arsenal.

Paul Kapur proposes an explanation that is an alternative to the stability-instability paradox. In his account, Pakistani leaders bet that although India could use its conventional superiority to reverse Pakistani territorial gains, it will refrain for fear of a nuclear attack. It is not stability but instability, “the danger of nuclear escalation, that allows weak, revisionist Pakistan to undertake limited conventional aggression against India in hopes of altering regional boundaries without provoking a full-scale Indian conventional response” (Kapur 2006, 41).

In fact, both those who posit the relevance of the paradox, and those who claim that conflict between India and Pakistan is not due to the paradox, assume that Pakistan is revisionist. Both assume that India has strong incentives to refrain from nuclear use. If it were thought that India would run any risk – including suffering a nuclear attack – in
order to protect its territorial integrity, Pakistan would not be emboldened. This paper focuses on India’s incentives, and examines why and how India signals that nuclear weapons will not be used.

Another crucial factor in the India-Pakistan situation is cross-border terrorism. Several militant outfits operating out of Pakistan have vowed to carry out attacks on Indian soil. The extent to which these groups are supported by the Pakistani state (or certain elements of that state) is a matter of heated debate. Nevertheless, when there are terrorist attacks on Indian assets, the involvement of the Pakistani government is immediately assumed in Indian public opinion. Consequently, the democratically-elected government in New Delhi feels impelled to respond to the (supposed) provocation by Islamabad.

The international community, and in particular the United States, are concerned about India-Pakistan interactions. This concern is the third significant factor in the deterrence relationship. During a crisis, India must reassure the international community that it is neither contemplating nor provoking the use of nuclear weapons.

How has India responded to these three factors? To be sure, several Indian leaders have affirmed over two decades that nuclear deterrence is in operation in South Asia, and that the option of a full-scale war is off the table (Anon 2016b; Thapar 2008). India has made a formal declaration of No First Use (NFU), stating that it will not use nuclear weapons first, only in response to a nuclear attack.

At the same time, the Indian government has come up with innovative statements and actions that signal that it does have military-diplomatic options to counter Pakistan’s moves. In terms of statements, India unveiled the military plan “Cold Start”, designed to respond to Pakistani aggression with quick mobilization of select military units (Ladwig 2007–2008). There have been hints that India’s NFU declaration has been modified to allow for nuclear first use under some circumstances (Shukla 2017). India has also undertaken actions that signal its will to react. For instance, in 2016, India carried out a semi-covert operation using special forces across the Line of Control with Pakistan, dubbed a “surgical strike”. This small-scale operation was in response to an attack on Indian military personnel a few days earlier.

Reassurance in Four Crises

Threats are avidly discussed during and after crises, but reassurance, being more subtle, receives less attention. The following section discusses four crises in the period of formal nuclear weapon possession.

1999: The Kargil War

The 1998 tests were followed by a period where Pakistan and India entered into discussions (“the Lahore talks”) that were meant to show that they could manage nuclear tensions in a responsible way. These talks were still underway when incursions were detected in the Kargil sector of the border in May 1999. Military personnel from the Pakistan Army (Northern Light Infantry) and insurgents had occupied the mountain heights. The government of Pakistan denied its involvement for several weeks (Kumar 1999). Indian armed forces mobilized to regain control of the heights. Three
months of intense conventional fighting followed, sparking fears that a nuclear weapon would actually be used for the first time after 1945 (Dugger 2002).

During the crisis, both parties issued veiled nuclear threats. Pakistan hinted that it was on the brink of using nuclear weapons. The goal was probably to heighten the probability of US/international intervention and end hostilities quickly – in a longer war, Indian strength in conventional weapons is likely to prevail. On the Indian side, the Chief of Naval Staff declared that India was fully prepared to counter nuclear strikes (Anon 1999). India moved some missiles, and also increased the alert status of its forces (Narang 2014, 270–71; Ramana 2003).

At the same time, India sent signals of reassurance to Pakistan, and to the international audience. Indian leaders were convinced of the importance of staying behind Pakistan’s “red lines” or threshold for nuclear use. They were also mindful of the international audience: their behavior in the Kargil conflict was the first test of the 1998 Indian assertions that nuclear weapons would be used only as a last resort.

India signaled the limited nature of its response in several ways. First, it kept its forces on the Indian side of the LoC, and limited its conventional operations. Second, civilian authorities stipulated that the air force refrain from attacking assets on the Pakistani side of the LoC, even though this probably heightened Indian casualties (Roychowdhury and Singh 1999). Over five hundred Indian soldiers lost their lives in the Kargil conflict (Pande 2005, 27). In the aftermath, some military leaders and analysts criticized the government for this choice. They claimed that lives had been needlessly lost because of the restrictions on airpower (Datta 2005). As Manoj Joshi puts it, Pakistani nuclear weapons compelled India to restrict itself to the narrow killing field that Pakistan had created (Joshi 1999). Third, Indian combat activities were restricted to the Kargil sector; a second front was not opened up (Bell and MacDonald 2019). When queried by the military about the possibility of attacking Pakistan elsewhere, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee reportedly responded with a simple statement to the effect that the other side had a bomb (Narang 2014, 272).

It is important to note that public opinion in India supported crossing the Line of Control in “hot pursuit” of the infiltrators and attacking terrorist camps on the other side. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government eschewed these options. Also to be noted: Kargil was South Asia’s first “media war”, with the Indian press and television channels showing a distinct bellicose bias (Manchanda 2001). The conflict was playing out shortly before the relatively weak interim government headed into national elections. We can see that reassurance took priority over the imperatives of domestic politics.

India also signaled to the international community that, in contrast to Pakistan, its behavior was rational and responsible. India’s ambassador to Washington called Pakistan the “epicenter of international terrorism”. He held it responsible for terrorist training camps, the growth of “terrorist factories”, and “nuclear blackmail”. He contrasted this with India’s choices, such as adherence to the NFU policy (Sardesai 2003). India’s National Security Adviser highlighted the role of democratic institutions, declaring that Kargil had “demonstrated that our system and the political leadership believe in great responsibility and restraint, as you would expect from the largest democracy in the world” (Sidhu 2007, 145).

The Indian handling of the crisis was praised by the United States (Singh 2007). Whereas India’s stances during crises marked it as a mature country, Western fears of nuclear escalation boomeranged on Pakistan (Guha 1999; Karnad 2002,
Eventually, Pakistan’s miscalculations regarding the international reaction to its armed incursion turned the tactical victory scored at Kargil into a strategic defeat. The intervention of US President Bill Clinton in July 1999 forced Pakistan’s civilian Prime Minister to order a withdrawal from Kargil (Riedel 2002).

The 2001–02 Border Standoff

A small convoy of vehicles unsuccessfully attempted to storm the Indian Parliament in December 2001. The Indian government accused the group Jaish-e-Mohammed of carrying out the daring attack, and demanded the extradition of several operatives allegedly residing in Pakistan. The demand was backed up with the largest Indian troop mobilization since the 1971 war, codenamed Operation Parakram. Approximately 800,000 Indian troops were mobilized on the border for several months, facing off with Pakistani soldiers (Narang 2009).

Indian public opinion was inflamed by the attack on Parliament, and further by a May 2002 assault on the Kaluchak camp, which housed the families of military personnel. Again, there were strident demands that the government pursue military action against Pakistan. According to retired Pakistani military intelligence chief, General Durrani, the Vajpayee government in New Delhi faced a “minimum political necessity” to mobilize Indian troops (Dulat, Durrani, and Sinha 2018, 215). Prime Minister Vajpayee’s party was facing four crucial state elections at the time.

In a televised address, Vajpayee issued signals of threat, declaring that this time the battle against terrorism would be fought in a decisive manner (Anon 2001). Both India and Pakistan stated that all options were being considered (Gardiner 2002). As a result of this, and other threats, nuclear war seemed a distinct possibility. Some scholars drew the lesson that India had become more comfortable with issuing nuclear threats. V.R. Raghavan has described the 2002 mobilization as proof that Indian strategy, influenced by the response to 9/11 by the United States, “had graduated from defensive to proactive, offensive responses to terrorism” (Raghavan 2004).

Although the 2001–02 crisis featured several threatening signals, there were some signals of reassurance as well. First, as in 1999, India signaled that the deployment was rational, and specifically a response to the Parliament attack. Even when Pakistani President Musharraf declared to a German magazine that he would use an atomic weapon if Pakistan’s existence were threatened, India did not respond (Roy Choudhury 2004).

Second, India continued adherence to routine confidence building measures: less than three weeks after the attack, on the first day of 2002, New Delhi exchanged with Islamabad navigational coordinates of their nuclear installations and facilities, as they had done for the past thirteen years in accordance with the 1998 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities. India also notified Pakistan in advance about a test of its Medium Range Ballistic Missile, Agni, as per the 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (Roy Choudhury 2004).

Third, Indian troops did not cross the border or the Line of Control, aside from an action to repulse an alleged probe by Pakistan army personnel, intruding 800 metres inside the Neelam sector in Kashmir (Mehta 2003). Finally, the government realized that partisan politics or parochial organizational concerns should not be allowed to influence signaling. In January 2002, the Chief of Army Staff, General Padmanabhan,
made a statement about retaliation against a nuclear strike. Within hours, in an unprecedented public counter to the military, India’s Defence Minister cautioned against handling nuclear issues “in a cavalier manner” and sought to dispel “uncalled-for concerns” about the General’s statement (Roy Choudhury 2004).

At times, India’s signaling became complicated. On May 22, the Indian Prime Minister, declared to troops: “the time has come for a decisive battle and we will have a sure victory in this battle”. It is probable that Vajpayee intended to boost the morale of personnel, who had been at the highest level of operational readiness for five months. However, the statement was perceived as threatening, both in Islamabad and in Washington (Roy Choudhury 2004).

In the international community, India garnered sympathy as a victim of terrorism, particularly as a democracy fighting terrorism. Indian leaders cited the precedent of the United States invading Iraq with the goal of pre-empting terrorist attacks (Anon 2002). Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha drew a clear parallel, stating: “If lack of democracy, possessing weapons of mass destruction and export of terrorism are criterion, Pakistan is a fit case for pre-emptive strike” (Anon 2003). Gaurav Kampani writes that “India was able to frame the insurgency in Kashmir as a war between a multicultural democracy and monocultural sectarianism” (Kampani 2002).

2008: The Mumbai Attacks

On 26 November 2008, a small group of militants belonging to the militant Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba – which had been banned by the Pakistani government during the 2002 border standoff – launched a daring sea assault from Karachi, Pakistan. The target was again Mumbai. A series of simultaneous attacks targeted hospitals, railway stations, areas frequented by foreign tourists, and Jewish sites. Over 160 lives were lost.

The world feared that the Manmohan Singh government in New Delhi – a few months away from a tough general election – would retaliate with military action, that could escalate to nuclear war. During this tense period, Pakistani officials at one point seriously feared a surprise air attack, and at another were shaken by a hoax caller pretending to be the Indian Foreign Minister (Abbas 2008; Coll 2009). In India, some former bureaucrats and military personnel, as well as media pundits, called for conducting “limited military strikes” across the Line of Control, perhaps using special forces or so-called smart bombs (Raghavan and Chaudhuri 2008).

In the event, India’s response was extraordinarily restrained. New Delhi did not mobilize military forces to retaliate against Lashkar camps operating in Pakistan. The civilian authorities in New Delhi rejected a proposal by the Air Force to bomb these camps (Singh and Chaudhuri 2011). Pakistan was presumably reassured when India did not mobilize troops. However, India put diplomatic pressure on Pakistan both directly, and through the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia (Nayak and Krepon 2012, 46).

The government, headed by the Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, faced accusations that it was bowing to US pressure and going easy on Pakistan. However, according to Vipin Narang, there is little to suggest that pressure from Washington stopped India’s leaders. The US put pressure on Pakistan – not India – to rein in militant groups. Narang posits that nuclear deterrence worked: that Pakistan’s asymmetric escalation posture inhibited Indian leaders from executing militarily effective
retaliatory options that might have otherwise been considered (Narang 2010, 121). A former Indian Chief of Army Staff, General Shankar Roychowdhury, bluntly stated that Pakistan’s threat of early nuclear first-use deterred India from seriously considering conventional military strikes (Narang 2010, 84).

The few accounts that exist of decision-making in New Delhi in November and December 2008, confirm that the specter of nuclear retaliation stayed the hand of revenge (Rabasa et al. 2009). According to interviews conducted by Pranab Samanta, “the unpredictability on the Pakistan side and the fear that its decision makers could opt for a disproportionate response, including the nuclear option, stymied any possible chance of military action” (Samanta 2010).

Signals of reassurance also sought to convince major foreign powers that India was not about to take precipitate military action. These signals opened up the space for world leaders – who had an interest in condemning support of terrorism and nuclear use – to focus on Pakistan instead. That is, the military option became less attractive partly because there was adequate pressure on Pakistan from the international community – particularly after the interception of messages between the attackers on the ground and their controllers in Pakistan – to open an investigation. Indian leaders concluded that “military force ought to be used only as the last resort, and efforts mounted first to exert international pressure to make support for terror very costly for Pakistan” (Thapar 2008).

2016: “Surgical” Strikes

In an early morning attack on 18 September 2016, armed militants targeted an army camp in Uri, a garrison town close to the LoC and killed 19 Indian soldiers. The Indian government claimed that items bearing Pakistani markings were found at the site, and held the organization Jaish-e-Mohammad responsible for the attack (Peri 2016). Later, another organization, Lashkar-e-Taiba, was identified as carrying out the attack (Tiwary 2017). Considering that the BJP was again in power, this time under Prime Minister Narendra Modi – a known hardliner on the issue of Pakistan – there were fears of escalation. Moreover, Modi’s party, the BJP, was facing elections in several states within a few months.

Ten days after the Uri attacks, India struck back with simultaneous raids targeting training camps for terrorists in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. This meant that troops crossed the LoC. It is estimated that 70–80 men (both uniformed personnel and others not in uniform) were killed in these raids (Gokhale 2017, loc. 735). It must be noted that there is considerable doubt and confusion about the location of the targets and number of casualties in the raids (Kapur 2018, 73).

On 29 September 2016, the Director-General of Military Operations (DGM0) of the Indian Army made a statement to the media, at a rare joint press conference of the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs (Anon 2016a). This statement contains several signals of reassurance, although it concludes with a clear signal of threat for the future:

… the Indian Armed Forces are fully prepared for any contingency that may arise. It is India’s intention to maintain peace and tranquillity in the region. But we cannot allow the
terrorists to operate across the Line of Control with impunity and attack citizens of our
country at will. . . we expect the Pakistani army to cooperate with us to erase the menace of
terrorism from the region.

The statement reads:

Based on very credible and specific information which we received yesterday that some
terrorist teams had positioned themselves at launch pads along the Line of Control with an
aim to carry out infiltration and terrorist strikes in Jammu & Kashmir and in various other
metros in our country, the Indian army conducted surgical strikes last night at these
launch pads.

The operations were basically focused to ensure that these terrorists do not succeed in their
design of infiltration and carrying out destruction and endangering the lives of citizens of our
country.

We note that the DGMO’s statement claims that the operation was carried out on the basis
of information about specific terrorist plots. He refers to “launchpads”, a more technical-
sounding term than “militant training facilities” or “terrorist camps”. He uses terms such as
“specific”, “credible”, “focused”, and “positioned” to heighten this impression. All of these
terms contribute to the understanding of this military operation as “surgical”.

Moreover, the statement is carefully crafted to portray a rational response and
remove any impression that India was lashing out in anger:

The matter had been taken up at highest diplomatic levels and through military channels.
India has also offered consular access to these apprehended terrorists for Pakistan to verify
their confessions. Furthermore, we had proposed that fingerprints and DNA samples of
terrorists killed in Punch and Uri could be made available to Pakistan for investigation.
Despite our persistent urging that Pakistan respect its January 2004 commitment for not
allowing its soil or territory under its control to be used for terrorism against India, there
has been no let up.

Finally, the statement emphasizes limited scope: “The operations aimed at neutralizing
terrorists have since ceased. We do not have any plans for further continuation”.

A former head of the Pakistani military intelligence service, General Durrani, described
the strikes as a face-saving device for the government in New Delhi, which was confronting
an uncontrollable upsurge in militancy in Kashmir. Durrani went on to suggest that
although the Indian military action was closer to hot pursuit than a “surgical strike”,
being cognizant of the constraints on the India government, Pakistan wisely accepted the
description (Dulat, Durrani, and Sinha 2018, 210). In what appears to be a case of what
Austin Carson calls “tacit collusion”, Pakistan refrained from publicizing the covert activity
by India as a way of resisting pressure from its own citizens to escalate (Carson 2016).

Interestingly, while opposition parties in India demanded proof of the raid, the
government did not release video footage of the raid until June 2018. Upon this release,
government ministers proclaimed that the delay showed that there had been no
intention of garnering political mileage during the election campaign (Anon 2018). It
is also possible that the footage was not released during the crisis period to avoid
exacerbating calls for revenge in Pakistan.
Balancing Threat and Reassurance: Sustainable in South Asia?

Nuclear optimists would view the description of reassurance presented above as proof that deterrence works. However, such a conclusion would be unwarranted. First, the analysis in this paper has only dealt with nuclear reassurance signaling from India. Pakistan may have very different motivations during crises. It may be rational for Pakistan to signal that it is highly motivated to use nuclear weapons – regardless of whether it truly intends to – to trigger intervention by outside powers like the United States. Pakistan may also choose not to “receive” Indian signals of reassurance, depending on its civil-military dynamics and electoral cycle. Second, even in cases where India and Pakistan are seeking to avoid war, reassurance may be inadequate to prevent war for the three reasons listed here. The section concludes with a consideration of steps to bolster reassurance.

Complexity: Multiple Audiences

Unlike in the Cold War strategic situation where the United States and the Soviet Union were in dialogue primarily with each other, the deterrence game in South Asia has both sub-state (such as militant groups) and extra-regional players (like China and the United States). Consequently, the signals that Indian and Pakistani leaders wish to convey are received by multiple audiences.

One could imagine a scenario in which an Indian statement succeeds in reassuring Pakistan, but emboldens China; or another where the Pakistani military pulls back in the face of a credible threat, but the same massive threat pushes insurgents over the edge and triggers a surge in suicide attacks. Especially problematic are sub-state actors (say, those targeted by a surgical strike), since they are not necessarily under the control of state actors. Stephen Tankel, writing about the Lashkar-e-Taiba, has pointed out that since Pakistan’s proxies operate without critical oversight from their handlers in order to maintain plausible deniability, they could inadvertently cross India’s red lines (Tankel 2011, 113).

This discussion points to the need for a clear channel of trusted communication. During the 2001–02 border standoff, both countries withdrew their High Commissioners (Ambassadors) and halved the strength of their diplomatic missions (Roy Choudhury 2004). This weakened formal diplomatic channels. Retired intelligence chiefs Dulat and Durrani have suggested that Indian and Pakistani intelligence services set up a mechanism for coordination, which in the event of an incident such as the Mumbai attacks, would exchange information that could avert a nuclear exchange (Dulat and Durrani 2011). They even suggest that, given advance warning and discussion, Pakistan would accept a “choreographed response”, which could include bombing of three or four places on its territory, as an Indian response to a Mumbai-style attack (Dulat, Durrani, and Sinha 2018, 212).

A second policy implication is for the international audience, which wants to see signals of reassurance. In the midst of a crisis, intensive diplomacy by the United States or the European Union may in fact throw off the delicate balance between threat and reassurance. Having a solid diplomatic presence in both countries, and building strong relationships with civilian and military authorities prior to any crisis, would be the optimal practice for international actors. This is particularly important in the case of
Pakistan, which has endured diplomatic disengagement from the United States over disagreements over counter-terrorism operations.

**Imprecision: Doctrine and Force Development**

India’s goal is to conceive of military operations that stay under Pakistan’s red lines. However, neither are these lines clearly drawn, nor is it in Pakistan’s interest to clarify them. In 2002, a top decision-maker in Pakistan, General Khalid Kidwai, conveyed the message that even political destabilization or economic strangulation of Pakistan would be cause for nuclear use (Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs 2002). By keeping the nuclear threshold low and uncertain, Pakistan can deter a wider range of enemy actions. Therefore, signals of reassurance, however carefully crafted, are drawing on misleading information.

Take the example of the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border. A former Pakistani President, Pervez Musharraf, is on record that even a step across the LoC by India would trigger a nuclear war. Mark Bell and Julia Macdonald see this as an example of clear communication of red lines. In their case study of Kargil, this clarity, among other factors, leads them to classify that 1999 conflict as a “staircase crisis” with controlled escalation (Bell and Macdonald 2019, 19). However, in September 2016, India’s so-called surgical strikes did cross the LoC (and in fact may have attacked targets at quite some distance inside Pakistan-held territory). It appears that the LoC is no longer a true firebreak on the ladder of nuclear escalation.

A lack of clarity is also noted in the matter of India’s NFU pledge. This was a key element of its reassurance strategy, right from the start of India’s existence as a declared nuclear power. However, it appears that in an attempt to signal that it retains multiple options to respond militarily to Pakistani moves, India has modified the NFU. In 2003, the Draft Nuclear Doctrine (which incidentally was never formalized) suggested that India reserved the right to respond to biological or chemical attacks with nuclear weapons. In 2016, India’s Cabinet Minister for Defence, Manohar Parrikar expressed his personal opposition to the NFU policy. Today, the parameters of the Indian NFU are unclear (Narang and Clary 2016). This leads to confusion, which may lead Pakistani decision-makers, expecting an Indian first strike in a crisis, to strike first.

The analysis in the paper has focused on both actions and statements that signal reassurance. While India’s statements continue to be reassuring, certain actions in the domain of military development appear threatening to Pakistan – especially because they are neither discussed openly nor integrated with a broader strategy. Vipin Narang points to the incongruence between the declared strategy of assured retaliation, and India’s plans to develop ballistic missile defense systems and multiple independently targetable warheads. Although these plans are in their infancy, and are potentially countering Chinese rather than Pakistani moves, decision-makers in Islamabad are forced to consider the Indian plans as part of a counterforce strategy against their assets (Narang 2018). The imprecision inherent in the formulation used “minimum deterrent” or “credible minimum deterrent” fosters the potential hijacking of policy by organizational interests in the military or defense scientific establishment.
Political Pressure: Reaction to Attacks

Three of the four crises described above (in December 2001, November 2008, and September 2016) were triggered by attacks on Indian soil by terrorists allegedly backed by Pakistan. The Kargil conflict had a much stronger link to the Pakistani government. In all four cases, the government in New Delhi faced intense pressure from its citizens for a dramatic military strike against Pakistan. It is to be noted that the pressure has been on an upward trend: in 2016 a surprisingly large percentage of poll respondents were even willing to face nuclear annihilation to punish Pakistan for the Uri attacks (Anon 2016c).

Political pressure stems from three main sources. First, Indians are dismayed over the inability of the government to secure the borders and prevent attacks on innocent civilians. For instance, a mere two months after the post-Parliament attack border standoff in 2001–02, Defence Minister George Fernandes was forced to admit in Parliament that many of the terrorist camps in Pakistan, which were closed or relocated to interior areas during July–August 2002, had re-opened (Pande 2005, 30).

Second, politicians exploit the feeling of frustration among citizens by making untenable promises to end cross-border activity and terrorism. For instance, a top leader, Amit Shah, promised during the 2014 national election campaign that there would be no such intrusions under a BJP government (Anon 2014). Each regime in New Delhi faces greater pressure to threaten Pakistan than its predecessor did. A few months after the so-called surgical strikes, two Indian Army personnel were killed (and their bodies apparently mutilated) on the LoC (Das and Roche 2017). The Modi government once again came under pressure to punish Pakistan and/or its proxies, but managed to stave off the pressure (Talukdar 2017).

Third, as retired intelligence chiefs Dulat and Durrani point out, the media (in particular television and social media) profit by inflaming public sentiment and heightening the danger of war (Dulat, Durrani, and Sinha 2018, 213). Reflecting on the publicity around the 2016 strikes, a retired senior military officer noted that even successful operations can become a burden, as they raise expectations when the next crisis occurs (Chinna 2018). From this, we can conclude that signals of reassurance are likely to be perceived by domestic audiences as signs of political weakness. In a future nuclear crisis, Indian authorities may not be motivated to transmit reassuring signals, and this will endanger the delicate balance of threat and reassurance.

Bolstering Reassurance

In the long term, only a comprehensive dialogue between India and Pakistan, which takes up the core dispute over Kashmir, but also addresses other burning issues such as sponsorship of terrorism, support of sub-national insurgency, water rights disputes, bilateral arms control and verification, etc., would lead to a lasting peace. However, we may consider bolstering the signaling of reassurance in nuclear crises for the short to medium term.

Sub-national and extra-national actors are part of the audience for signaling. The national leadership in both countries should be aware of the dangers inherent in using non-state actors against adversaries – what has been called the “riding the tiger”
phenomenon. During crises, these non-state actors must be included in the loop and governments should attempt to keep a tight rein on their activities. The United States and other major powers should be aware of the existence of multiple audiences, and adjust their expectations accordingly. For example, pressing leaders to apologize or de-escalate may have unexpected, negative consequences.

Imprecision has been identified as a major issue in signaling reassurance. Imprecision can be remedied in non-crisis periods, by expanding Confidence Building Measures to include discussions of terminology used for routine troop movements, terms used by military and politicians, and even trusted media outlets. The last obstacle that was identified – political pressure on governments to issue threats rather than reassurance – is the hardest to tackle. The publics of both countries should be educated on the costs and consequences of nuclear war in South Asia. The media have a vital role in this regard, in addition to refraining from inflammatory statements and speculation during crises. A model code of conduct could be drawn up by a bilateral committee and responsible media outlets could sign on to it. Most importantly, politicians must eschew ultranationalist posturing, both during crises and otherwise.

**Conclusion**

In March 2000, in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict, then-US President Bill Clinton described South Asia as the most dangerous place on earth. The Indian President responded by terming such descriptions alarmist and counter-productive (Marcus 2000). By analyzing four crises between India and Pakistan, the paper has highlighted that India’s behavior in crises includes both threat and reassurance. Although scholars and policy-makers are less likely to discuss signals of reassurance than threats, reassurance has played a role in ensuring that the India-Pakistan crises do not “go nuclear” in the sense of a nuclear exchange. At the same time, the paper also discussed three factors that impede signals of reassurance, and cautioned that the balance between threat and reassurance is too delicate to be relied on to keep the peace between India and Pakistan.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on Contributor**

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