

# Revisiting the Role of Nuclear Weapons in India-Pakistan Conflict: A Case Study of the Kargil Conflict

Rizwan Zeb \*

## Abstract

*The Kargil conflict is categorised as a “staircase nuclear conflict.” According to the literature, in such conflicts, the incentives for the first use of nuclear weapons are present. The Kargil conflict, along with the Cuban Missile Crisis between the US and the USSR and the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash, are taken as the only incidents when two nuclear states fought each other since the advent of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the generally held belief, this paper argues that Kargil was not a nuclear conflict. This paper will raise some questions about the categorisation of Kargil as a nuclear conflict. Prime amongst them: what was the level of readiness and operationalisation of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons at the time of the Kargil operation? The paper argues that Kargil occurred too soon after the nuclearisation of India and Pakistan and that because it occurred one-year post-Indo-Pakistan nuclear tests should not elevate it to be a nuclear conflict. The paper further argues that there is a need for more rigorous analysis to work out criteria for how, when and why a conflict should be categorised and analysed as a nuclear conflict.*

**Keywords:** Kargil Conflict, India-Pakistan Relations, Brasstacks, Nuclear Conflict, US.

## Introduction

More than two decades since it took place, Kargil remains a hotly debated issue in the global strategic community because it not only contributed significantly in creating perception of Pakistan and India in the post-nuclear South Asia, but also because it is taken as a staircase nuclear crisis and bracketed among the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Ussuri River border war. The Kargil conflict was unique in many ways: it was limited in space but

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\* The author is Associate Professor and DS Research, War Wing, Air War College Institute, Karachi. The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own.

resulted in the highest number of casualties and lasted longer than any other Indo-Pak conflict. New Delhi throughout the conflict kept working on perception building through its signalling to the US that unlike Pakistan, it is a responsible nuclear state and that it would be compelled to escalate unless they intervened and made Islamabad pull back.

Since the 1990 compound crisis in Kashmir in which the Americans believed war might happen between India and Pakistan, Washington was convinced that India-Pakistan could have a nuclear exchange when its intelligence reports indicated that nuclear weapons were being readied. Now with rising hostilities in Kargil, the American intelligence once again reported that the Pakistanis were preparing a nuclear weapon deployment. The only source of this information is Bruce Riedel, who was present during President Clinton's one on one meeting with the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, and was the minute taker of the July 4, 1999 meeting between the two.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the generally held belief, this paper argues that Kargil was not a nuclear conflict as there is no solid evidence available for this. The paper argues that if this assumption is scrutinised and extensively examined, it raises more questions than to provide answers. Those who take it as a nuclear conflict base their argument on the timing of the conflict. For them, because it occurred within a year of India and Pakistan nuclear tests, it is a nuclear conflict and that it was due to the presence of the nuclear factor that New Delhi, unlike 1965, restricted itself from opening another front. To test this, the paper seeks to answer questions such as what exactly happened? When exactly the operation was planned? What was the role (if any) of the newly acquired nuclear capability during the planning and execution of this operation? What was the level of operationalisation of Pakistani weapons at the time? Finally, if the presence of nuclear weapons was not a factor in the conflict then why New Delhi never attempted to expand the conflict by opening another front, something that it did in response to Operation Gibraltar in 1965?

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Riedel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House," *Policy Papers Series 2002* (University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Advanced Study of India, 2002), [www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/research/kargil/reidel.pdf](http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/research/kargil/reidel.pdf) ; also see, P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Cheema and Stephen Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process American Engagement in South Asia* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 135.

The paper is divided into four parts: the first overviews the literature on nuclear conflicts. The second part scans through the role of nuclear weapons in pre-overt nuclearisation of Indo-Pak conflicts, notably Brasstacks and the 1990 Compound crisis. The third section details the causes, events and effects of the Kargil conflict. These sections set the stage for the concluding section that critically analyses the question of whether Kargil was a nuclear conflict.

## **Nuclear Conflicts: A Conceptual Framework**

Despite a huge set of literature on nuclear issues, there is still no universally accepted definition of what is a nuclear conflict? Is it a conflict between two nuclear-armed states involving nuclear weapons? Or a conventional conflict between two nuclear states or that at least one of the two states involved is a nuclear state? One of the most commonly used definitions of a nuclear conflict is “the nuclear crisis is the primary arena in which nuclear-armed states settle important international disputes.”<sup>2</sup> This definition fails to answer the above-mentioned questions. According to another definition, “a nuclear crisis is an interaction between two nuclear-armed states in which there is a change in type and/or an increase in the intensity of disruptive or hostile behaviours with a heightened probability of military hostilities that destabilises their relationship and begins with a disruptive act or event.”<sup>3</sup>

What further complicates any attempt to define and list the key characteristics of a nuclear conflict is that all the nuclear conflicts that have taken place so far are different due to the different factors that were involved and at play. Cuban Missile Crisis, Ussuri River crisis, Indo-Pak crises post-1998, Sino-Indian crises in Doklam and Ladakh are few of the most commonly known so-called nuclear conflicts.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” *International Organisation* 67, no. 1 (2013): 142.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Bell & Julia Macdonald, “How to Think about Nuclear Crises,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no.2 (February 2019), [https://tnsr.org/2019/02/how-to-think-about-nuclear-crises/#\\_ftn43](https://tnsr.org/2019/02/how-to-think-about-nuclear-crises/#_ftn43); also see, Bell & Macdonald, “How Dangerous Was Kargil? Nuclear Crises in Comparative Perspective,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2, 135-148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626691>

Bell and Macdonald have identified four models or types of nuclear conflicts:<sup>4</sup>

- a) Brinkmanship
- b) Firestorm
- c) Stability-instability
- d) Staircase

In *Brinkmanship* crises, according to Bell and Macdonald, the parties in conflict have “limited incentives to use nuclear weapons first and low levels of controllability.” They argue that such conflicts are modelled around:

Thomas Schelling, who emphasised the political utility of “threats that leave something to chance” under circumstances in which deliberate first nuclear use is not credible. Similarly, scholars of the “nuclear revolution,” such as Kenneth Waltz, Charles Glaser and Robert Jervis also view nuclear crises in this way, although such scholars tend to be more cautious than Schelling about the possibility of using the political leverage that comes from the manipulation of nuclear risk.... States may take steps to escalate a conflict, but those steps are unlikely to involve deliberate first nuclear use, which is not typically credible in brinkmanship crises given low incentives to use nuclear weapons first.<sup>5</sup>

In such type of conflicts, the chances of nuclear escalations always exist. However, such an escalation only occurs when the conflict gets out of hand and the escalation is uncontrolled as well. What does this mean for the future of the conflict and its outcome? In such situations, the direction of the conflict and its future trajectory mostly depends on how far a leader wants to go and the level of risk-taking s/he is willing to take. Signalling in such conflicts plays a significant role. Arguably, the balance of resolve determines the outcome of such conflicts.

To explain a nuclear conflict termed as a *Firestorm* nuclear conflict, Bell and Macdonald use the firestorm analogy and Iran and Israel conflict. They ask: what would happen in case Iran acquires nuclear weapons? Who would be its first target in any conflict in the Middle East? They believe it

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bell & Macdonald, “How to Think about Nuclear Crises.”

would be Israel because Tehran has repeatedly expressed its resolve to wipe Israel from the world's map. Such a conflict does not require prior escalation, could suddenly erupt and expand without warning. Hence the name 'Firestorm' is given to this type of nuclear conflict. Such an escalation could be either deliberate or inadvertent. Such type of nuclear conflicts is the most dangerous.

Out of all the types or models of nuclear conflict, the *Stability-Instability* model or type is perhaps the most well-known among the students of security and strategic studies. Robert Jarvis and Glenn Snyder are two of its most prominent proponents. According to this model, at the strategic level, nuclear weapons ensure stability yet at the lower level, the presence of nuclear weapons increases the chances of instability as the countries have a greater incentive to engage in low-level hostilities and conflicts.<sup>6</sup> According to Snyder: "the greater the stability of the 'strategic' balance of terror, the lower the stability of the overall balance at its lower levels of violence. Thus, firm stability in the strategic nuclear balance tends to destabilise the conventional balance."<sup>7</sup>

In a way, one can argue that in this type of conflict, while nuclear weapons might embolden the involved parties to harm each other but restoring the actual use of nuclear weapons is highly unlikely as it maintains a balance of terror between the parties.

Over the years, vast literature has been produced on escalation and its different types. Escalation according to the literature is defined as "an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses the threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants."<sup>8</sup> Mederiros and Pollpeter elucidate that: "It is a fundamental dynamic in which adversaries engaged in a contest for limited objectives increase the force or breadth of their attacks to gain advantage or avoid defeat. Escalation can be unilateral, but actions perceived as escalatory often provoke other

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 31 as quoted in Bell & Macdonald, "How to Think about Nuclear Crises."

<sup>7</sup> Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in *Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1965), 198-99 as quoted by "How to Think about Nuclear Crises."

<sup>8</sup> Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 1.

combatants to increase their efforts, either to punish the earlier escalation or to counter its advantages. Left unchecked, cycles of provocation and counter provocation can intensify until the loss that each combatant incurs exceeds the value of its original stakes in the conflict.”<sup>9</sup>

There are three main types of escalation: *Deliberate*, *Inadvertent* and *Accidental*. Nuclear crises termed as the *Staircase* crises involve deliberate escalation: escalation that is done by a party when it acts on as per the available policy options. In staircase conflicts, deliberate first use of nuclear weapons is highly likely.

According to Bell and Macdonald, Staircase crises are dangerous and could lead to serious consequences. Parties involved in such type of conflicts escalate due to their national interests and issues that are important to the parties involved. Put differently, the issues involved are so vital that the parties are willing to escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. Such conflicts neither suddenly occur nor escalate immediately.

## **Nuclear Weapons and Indo-Pakistan Conflicts**

Scott Sagan in his article titled, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb” has listed several factors that could motivate a state to opt for nuclearization.<sup>10</sup> According to Sagan, three models explain the motivations of a state to build a nuclear bomb: the *Security Model* that focuses on a country’s security compulsions as the major factor. The *Domestic Politics Model* focuses on a state’s parochial domestic and bureaucratic interests and how building nuclear weapons advances these interests. The *Norms Model* explains the use of a nuclear weapon as a symbol of its modernity and identity.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan is a classical case for the Security Model.<sup>12</sup>

Since partition in 1947, India has been Pakistan’s major security concern. According to the threat perception, India is Pakistan’s primary

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security*, no.3 ( Winter 1996/1997): 54-86, <https://wjspaniel.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/sagan.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

threat. The developments that took place soon after partition, the Kashmir problem, and the 1965 War further reinforced this perception. Initially, Pakistan's nuclear programme was purely for peaceful purposes and remained so till 1972.<sup>13</sup> However, post-East Pakistan debacle, Pakistan started its nuclear weapons programme. After the 1974 so-called peaceful nuclear explosion/ test of India, this was further intensified.<sup>14</sup>

J.E. Dougherty has addressed the dilemma that Pakistan might have felt once India tested in 1974. According to Dougherty:

Proliferation by the reaction is a phenomenon associated with pairs of conflict-parties or historic rivals rather than a chain-reaction involving an indefinitely long series of countries. In the 'proliferation by reaction model,' if one country acquires nuclear weapons, the traditional foe feels itself under compulsion to acquire nuclear weapons for the sake of protective equilibrium.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, in keeping with the fact that Islamabad wanted to ensure its security, over the years, it presented New Delhi several arms control proposals ranging from signing a regional test-ban treaty, acceptance of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards to the creation of a South Asia nuclear-weapons-free zone,<sup>16</sup> all these proposals were rejected by New Delhi. It held the position that the scope of its programme and threat perception was much broader than Pakistan and had to take into account its animosity with China. New Delhi's rejection or non-responsiveness to these offers left Islamabad with no other option but to focus on its nuclear weapons programme and further intensify it.

Although Pakistan acquired the nuclear capability much earlier, it tested its nuclear weapons only when India once again tested its nuclear bomb in 1998. During the 1980s and 1990s, nuclear weapons or at least the perception that both countries had clear capability played a significant role in the ensuing Indo-Pak crises: the Brasstacks 1986-87 and the Compound

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<sup>13</sup> Feroz Hasan Khan, *Eating Grass The Making of the Pakistani Nuclear Bomb* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Rizwan Zeb, "Pakistan's Nuclear Journey-1," *Nation*, June 28, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/28-Jun-2020/pakistan-s-nuclear-journey>

<sup>15</sup> J.E. Dougherty, "Proliferation in Asia," *ORBIS* (Fall 1975): 926.

<sup>16</sup> For details on this point see; Samina Ahmed. "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program: Turning Points and Nuclear Choices," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 178-204.

crisis of 1990. In the proceeding paragraphs, the paper will overview these nuclear-relevant military confrontations and will examine the possible role nuclear weapons may have played in these events. It will also examine how the perception that evolved and developed in the West and especially the American policy circles during this period, greatly contributed and influenced their policy behaviour post nuclearisation.

The first time nuclear weapons were mentioned in the context of India and Pakistan was when *The Washington Post* reported citing American intelligence sources that New Delhi was planning to replicate the Israeli strike on the Iraqi Osirak and target Pakistan's Kahuta uranium enrichment plant.<sup>17</sup> New Delhi strongly denied this report as "totally false and unfounded" and "absolute rubbish."<sup>18</sup>

### **Brasstacks Crisis of 1986-87**

Held in Rajasthan in November 1986-March 1987, Brasstacks,<sup>19</sup> a yearlong military exercise was the brainchild of General Krishnaswamy Sundarajan (General Sunderji). The rationale for this exercise was to test new and modern military ideas such as mechanisation, mobility and air support.<sup>20</sup> What rang alarm bells in Islamabad was that it was being held only 20 miles from the border between India and Pakistan. Further exacerbating the anxiety in Islamabad were the reports that the participating contingents of the Indian army were carrying ammunition. Islamabad suspected that India was planning to attack Pakistan in the guise of a military exercise. The timing of this exercise was also important. At the time, Pakistan in alliance with the US was covertly involved in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. India, an ally of the USSR and long term partner, was now conducting a military exercise close to the Pakistani border. Pakistani strategic planners feared that the situation might develop into a two-frontal war against Pakistan. Islamabad counters mobilised and deployed Pakistan Army's Army Reserve North (ARN) and Army Reserve South (ARS) came

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<sup>17</sup> Milton R. Benjamin, "India Said to Eye Raid on Pakistan's A-plants," *Washington Post*, December 20, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> William Claiborne, "India Denies Plan to Hit Pakistani Nuclear Plants," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> This section draws heavily from Rizwan Zeb, "Deterrence Stability, Nuclear Redlines and India-Pakistan Conventional Imbalance," *Spot Light on Regional Affairs XXVIII, no. 4, 5 (April-May 2009)*.

<sup>20</sup> Chari, Cheema and Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 39.

in a position where they could target the Indian Punjab.<sup>21</sup> For a while, an Indo-Pak war seemed imminent.

According to some reports, it was General Zia-ul-Haq's travel to India on the pretext of watching an India-Pakistan cricket match that started the process of defusing the conflict.<sup>22</sup> President Zia during his visit, reportedly also held talks with the Indian leadership. Next came an understanding of a phased withdrawal to peacetime locations. During the negotiations, both sides agreed to several confidence-building measures (CBMs): prime amongst these CBMs was the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities that was signed on December 31, 1988.

Brasstack was not a nuclear conflict as nuclear weapons played no direct role in it but due to nuclear signalling during the crisis and the Dr A Q Khan interview brought the nuclear factor in it.

This was the first crisis between the two neighbours in which nuclear weapons figured as a decisive factor and nuclear signalling at the highest level was used. The most prominent of such signalling was the interview given to Kuldip Nayer by Dr A Q Khan in which he reportedly stated: "America knows it. What the CIA has been saying about our possessing the bomb is correct and so is the speculation of some foreign newspapers," adding that "Nobody can undo Pakistan or take us for granted. We are here to stay and let me be clear that we shall use the bomb if our existence is threatened." The president of Pakistan also confirmed this in his later interview to the *Time* magazine. The Indian side was quick to issue their response on these signals. Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, stated that "the Indian people will not be found wanting."<sup>23</sup>

The debate on whether Brasstacks was just a military exercise or a plan to attack Pakistan is still inconclusive. One certain thing is that post-Brasstack, General Sunderji, the mastermind behind the Brasstack stated that this was the last opportunity India had to defeat Pakistan conventionally.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> This is generally a contested claim. Knowledgeable sources claim that the process of resolution had already began. For detail see: Chari, Cheema and Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Zeb, "Deterrence Stability, Nuclear Redlines."

<sup>24</sup> Chari, Cheema, and Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 67.

## 1990 Compound Crisis

After a lapse of almost two decades, Kashmir once again emerged as a major dispute between Pakistan and India. In 1989, after decades of injustice, mismanagement and negligence on the part of New Delhi and encouraged by the Afghan resistance model, the people in the Indian-administered Kashmir once again rose for their freedom. However, India was quick to blame it on Islamabad. Within a year, it became a serious problem for New Delhi and the power corridors in New Delhi were humming with “Pakistan needing to be taught a lesson.” V. P. Singh, the then Indian Prime Minister, voicing this anger threatened Islamabad by publicly declaring that Pakistan could not wrestle Kashmir away from India without a war. India decided to mobilise its forces. The Indian army started to mass in the north. At the same time, the Indian army deployed its strike corps in the Rajasthan sector, [too].<sup>25</sup> Pakistan counter mobilised. As the military balance was not in favour of Islamabad, Washington strongly believed that to counter the conventional balance that was heavily tilted in favour of India, Pakistan could contemplate using its nuclear weapons. Seymour Hersh reported:

Sometime in the early spring of 1990, intelligence that was described as a hundred per cent reliable ... reached Washington with the ominous news that General Beg had authorised the technicians at Kahuta to put together nuclear weapons. Such intelligence, of “smoking gun” significance, was too precise to be ignored or shunted aside. The new intelligence also indicated that General baig was prepared to use the bomb against India if necessary. Precisely what was obtained could not be learned, but one American summarised the information as being, in essence, a warning to India that if “you move up here” — that is, begin a ground invasion into Pakistan — “we are going to take out Delhi.”<sup>26</sup>

Indian Prime Minister, V.P. Singh ordered his Scientific Adviser, V.S. Arunachalam to prepare for a possible counter nuclear attack.<sup>27</sup> These developments rang alarm bells in Washington and the American President, George H. W. Bush, sent Robert Gates to the region. The Gate mission, after intense negotiation, managed to defuse the situation.

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<sup>25</sup> Zeb, “*Deterrence Stability, Nuclear Redlines.*”

<sup>26</sup> Seymour Hersh, “On the Nuclear Edge,” *New Yorker*, March 29, 1993, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000).

It remains unclear how serious and real was the danger of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan during the 1990 compound crisis especially because neither India nor Pakistan had operationalised their nuclear capability. Cheema, Chari and Cohen rejected Hersh's claim as inaccurate<sup>28</sup> but Stimson Center's report on the 1990 crisis corroborates Hersh's account. The strongest testament in this regard is by Richard J. Kerr, who at the time was serving as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)'s Deputy Director: "It may be as close as we've come to a nuclear exchange. It was far more frightening than the Cuban missile crisis."<sup>29</sup>

The Indian strategic community viewed the compound crisis as a watershed event that changed the South Asia. According to K. Subrahmanyam, arguably the most influential Indian strategic thinker: "In 1965 after Pakistan's 'Operation Gibraltar,' the war of '65 happened. India didn't resort to a similar course of action in 1990."<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of which of these positions is accurate, Cheema, Chari and Cohen pointed to the most far-reaching implication of this conflict. According to them, the 1990 compound crisis convinced the world especially the Americans that South Asia is a dangerous place where the world's worst fear i.e., a nuclear war might translate into a reality. This belief strongly influenced their position as well as policy behaviour towards South Asia.<sup>31</sup> And this is exactly what was at play and happened when the Kargil conflict took place.

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<sup>28</sup> Chari, Cheema and Cohen, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The Compound Crisis of 1990* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> "Conflict Prevention and Risk Reduction: Lessons from the 1990 Crisis," in Michael Krepon and Chris Gagne, eds., *Nuclear Risk Reduction in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 2003) as quote by Zafar Iqbal Cheema, "Conflict, Crisis and Nuclear Stability in South Asia," <http://www.sassu.org.uk/pdfs/Cheema.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Devine Haggerty, "Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: The 1990 Indo-Pak Crisis," *International Security* as quoted by Cheema, "Conflict, Crisis and Nuclear Stability in South Asia."

<sup>31</sup> Zafar Iqbal Cheema, "Growing Conventional and Strategic Asymmetry and its Implications for South Asian Security," in P.I. Cheema and Muneer Ahmed, eds., *Ballistic Missiles and South Asian Security* (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), 2007).

## Kargil Conflict

Kargil conflict (May-July 1999) was unique in many ways: it occurred one year post-1998 Indo-Pakistan nuclear tests; it resulted in a high number of casualties on both sides; despite being limited in space, yet it lasted longer than all Indo-Pak wars.<sup>32</sup> Communication lines between the two countries remained intact at the highest level. The prime ministers of both countries regularly communicated. For instance, on May 24, 1999 Prime Minister Vajpayee declared that New Delhi would take all measures necessary to clear its territory. On May 28, 1999 Prime Minister of Pakistan offered formal talks and for that suggested that the Pakistani foreign minister would visit New Delhi. At the same time, Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Vajpayee established a back-channel mechanism for addressing the contentious issues: from Pakistan, seasoned diplomat Niaz Naik and from India, respected journalist R K Mishra met several times but this channel dried out in June.<sup>33</sup> During the conflict, India made a conscious effort to keep the conflict localised and not to expand it or open another front. Instead, New Delhi extensively practised two-pronged coercive diplomacy towards global power centres, especially Washington: i.), India is a responsible nuclear weapons state whereas Pakistan is an irresponsible nuclear weapons state, ii.), it would be compelled to escalate unless they intervened and make Islamabad to pull back.<sup>34</sup>

New Delhi believed that Pakistan launched this operation under the impression that the Indian army “was exhausted and suffering from low morale due to its long-drawn-out involvement in anti-insurgency operations in Kashmir which led to this operation.”<sup>35</sup> Pakistan’s position was different. Islamabad viewed this act as aimed at preempting an Indian military’s

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<sup>32</sup> For a most up-to-date and comprehensive account of the Kargil conflict read Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup* (Lahore: Sangemeel, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Robert G. Wirsing, *Kashmir in the Shadow of War: Regional Rivalries in a Nuclear Age* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 26-33.

<sup>34</sup> Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments US Crisis Management in South Asia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Kargil Review Committee, *From Surprise to Reckoning: Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 70-1 and 226. New Delhi is of the view that this operation was under consideration for a longer period as it is reported, though contested by few that it was presented to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto but she rejected it and that former Chief of Pakistan Army and Pakistan’s Ambassador to the US, General Jehangir Karamat, also opposed it.

operation in the Shaqma sector. According to reports, the aim of this Indian operation was to undermine Pakistan Army's ability to target the Kargil-Dras road.<sup>36</sup> A group of analysts tend to view Kargil from the larger perspective. For them, Kargil could only be understood once viewed as a part of the nibbling operations that continued over the years especially since the Indian occupation of Siachen in 1984.<sup>37</sup>

The initial reports of the conflict started to appear in May 1999.<sup>38</sup> In the beginning, New Delhi was unsure about the nature and scope of what was happening and took it as a problem that could be handled locally. However, within weeks, it reviewed its position. Soon a large contingent of troops was deployed in the area, followed by a decision to use air force against the intruders. Two fighter aircrafts and a helicopter was destroyed by Pakistan once they aggressed onto the Pakistani sides.<sup>39</sup> With the intensification of conflict, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary declared that "We will not hesitate to use any weapon in our arsenal to defend our territorial integrity."<sup>40</sup> According to some reports, India upgraded its nuclear forces to "Readiness State 3." As per Chengappa, this level implies that New Delhi was prepared to mate assembled warheads with delivery vehicles.<sup>41</sup>

During the conflict, American intelligence once again reported that India and Pakistan were inching towards a nuclear exchange. According to

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<sup>36</sup> Shireen M. Mazari, *The Kargil Conflict 1999: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Islamabad: The Institute of Strategic Studies, 2003), 42-62.

<sup>37</sup> Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 87.

<sup>38</sup> Shaukat Qadir, "An Analysis of the Kargil Conflict 1999," *RUSI Journal* 147, no.2 (April 2002), Mazari, *The Kargil Conflict 1999*, "Text of the Clinton-Sharif Statement, July 5, 1999," *Hindu*, July 6, 1999. Also see Ashok Krishna and P.R. Chari, eds. *Kargil: The Tables Turned* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 132-7, Praveen Swami, *The Kargil War* (New Delhi: Left World Books, 1999); Col Ravi Nanda, *Kargil: A Wake-up Call* (New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1999); Jasjit Singh ed. *Kargil 1999: Pakistan's Fourth War for Kashmir* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1999); Amrinder Singh, *A Ridge Too Far: War in the Kargil Heights* (Patiala: Amrinder Singh, 2001); Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002) ; J.N. Dixit, *India-Pakistan in War & Peace* (New Delhi: Books Today, 2002) and Maj. Gen. Rajendra Nath, *Musharraf's War* (New Delhi: Lancer's Books, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed account of the role and involvement of the IAF and IN, see: ok Krishna and Chari eds., *Kargil: The Tables Turned*.

<sup>40</sup> *Times of India*, June 2, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*.437.

Bruce Reidel, who is the only source for this claim, American intelligence sources reported that Pakistan was moving its nuclear weapons for a possible deployment.<sup>42</sup> Bruce Reidel reported that President Clinton asked Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif if he is aware of this development and that it might result in a nuclear war.<sup>43</sup> Sharif denied issuing any order to this effect and stated that this might be a counter move to the Indian movement.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the one-on-one meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the American President, President Clinton kept the Prime Minister of India Vajpayee updated. During the meeting, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, agreed to withdraw and end the hostilities. The end of the Kargil conflict was disastrous for Pakistan. The international community blamed Pakistan for its unprovoked aggression and violation of the LoC.<sup>45</sup> India painted Pakistan as an irresponsible nuclear weapons state with the tendency to use its status to achieve its revisionist agenda.

Critical Appraisal: Was Kargil a Nuclear Crisis The generally held belief is that Kargil was a nuclear conflict.<sup>46</sup> S. Paul Kapur believes:

Nuclear weapons... directly underlay Pakistan's decision to encroach on Indian territory at Kargil and trigger the conflict ... The Kargil conflict shows that nuclear weapons in fact have had significant destabilising effects on the South Asian environment. More generally, the case indicates that where a newly nuclear state wishes to alter the territorial status quo and is weaker than its enemy, nuclear proliferation can increase the likelihood of conventional conflict.<sup>47</sup>

Bruce Riedel, in his widely quoted and authoritative account of what was discussed and happened on July 4, 1999 at the Blair House during the meeting between the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the American President, claimed that prior to the meeting between the two, American intelligence reported that Pakistan was preparing for a possible nuclear strike on India. In 2015, he once again reiterated this. This time, he credited

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<sup>42</sup> Reidel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit."

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, (Cambridge: 2009).

<sup>47</sup> S.P. Kapur, "Nuclear Proliferation, the Kargil Conflict, and the South Asian Security," *Security Studies* 13, no.1 (2003): 81.

late Sandy Berger for advising the American President to stay firm and ensure that Pakistan must end what it started without any conditions. According to Riedel, this was due to the fact that the CIA daily intelligence brief for July 4, 1999 reported that Pakistan was preparing for deployment and possible use of its nuclear bomb against India.<sup>48</sup> Although several South Asia watchers consider Kargil a nuclear conflict,<sup>49</sup> the sole source of this claim is Bruce Riedel who was the minute taker during the one-on-one meeting between the American president and the Pakistani premier at Blair house. Those who consider it a nuclear conflict bracket it with the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash.<sup>50</sup> Bell and Macdonald classify Kargil as a staircase nuclear conflict. As we have seen in the conceptual section, a staircase conflict is a conflict in which the parties, most likely the one conventionally weak, have a greater incentive to inch towards using a nuclear weapon. In Kargil, Pakistan is considered to be such a party. A large number of South Asia watchers continue to believe that throughout the conflict especially during the heights of hostilities, there was a real threat of escalation of the conflict to the nuclear level. Kapur is not the only one who believed that the very reason Pakistan initiated Kargil was that it was fully aware that the presence of the nuclear weapons would restrict India's response options and that it would be compelled not to open another front. This view is further supported by a conversation that reportedly took place between the Indian Prime Minister and the Indian Army Chief. When the later during the height of hostilities suggested considering opening another front, the former pointed "but General *Sahib*, they have a nuclear bomb!"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Emma Henderson, "Kargil War: Pakistan planned to Drop Nuclear Bomb on India During Conflict, Former CIA Officer Claims," *Independent*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-india-nuclear-bomb-kargil-war-former-cia-officer-sandy-berger-bruce-riedel-a6758501.html>

<sup>49</sup> Mark S. Bell & Julia Macdonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil? Nuclear Crises in Comparative Perspective," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no.2 (2019): 135-148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626691>

<sup>50</sup> Harrison Salisbury, *The Coming War between Russia and China* (New York: Norton, 1969).

<sup>51</sup> Zeb, "Was Kargil a Nuclear Crisis?," *Pakistan Politico*, December 2019, [http://pakistanpolitico.com/was-kargil-a-nuclear-crisis/#:~:text=Kargil%20conflict%20is%20generally%20believed,close%20to%20a%20nuclear%20war.&text=The%20Kargil%20conflict%20\(May%20and,India%20and%20Pakistan%20have%20fought.](http://pakistanpolitico.com/was-kargil-a-nuclear-crisis/#:~:text=Kargil%20conflict%20is%20generally%20believed,close%20to%20a%20nuclear%20war.&text=The%20Kargil%20conflict%20(May%20and,India%20and%20Pakistan%20have%20fought.)

Yet there is hardly any evidence pointing to any role of nuclear weapons during the Kargil conflict. This could be further corroborated when one views how General Pervez Musharraf, Lt. Gen Aziz, Lt. Gen Mehmood and Maj. Gen Javed Hasan planned and executed it. In the words of Prime Minister of Pakistan's Special Advisor on National Security, Dr. Moeed Yusuf: "these individuals had never served in positions that would have afforded them any real understanding of nuclear strategy.... The operation was initially conceived in the late 1980s in a conventional environment and these officers believed that the same tactical, limited land-grab objectives would be more achievable under the nuclear overhang."<sup>52</sup> According to some sources, General Musharraf was convinced that it was doable and was a strong advocate for going for it for quite some time.<sup>53</sup> Robert Wirsing:

There is a great likelihood, in fact, that Pakistani expectations of military gains from Kargil were quite modest, that the main motivation was simply to bring relief to Pakistan's exposed beleaguered transport routes along the Line-of-Control by bringing India's own primary route within range of Pakistani artillery and that Pakistani decisions were caught significantly off guard by the effort's stunningly swift escalation into a major conflict.<sup>54</sup>

There are many questions that must be answered before Kargil could be taken as a nuclear conflict such as what was the operational level of Pakistani nuclear weapons? Responding to this question, General Musharraf has stated in his memoirs that they were not operational in 1999.<sup>55</sup> Feroz Hasan Khan's authoritative history of Pakistan's nuclear programme supports this view. What developments took place in the intervening year (1998-99)? Those who are aware of the post-nuclearisation developments in Pakistan know that the time between the test and the Kargil operation was when Islamabad was still working on its nuclear programme and its operationalisation. Another major issue for Islamabad was how to deal with the imposed sanctions and the resultant financial fallout. During this time, due to certain political decisions, there was an institutional and departmental tussle. The international community was pressurising Islamabad to sign the

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<sup>52</sup> Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environment US Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 55.

<sup>53</sup> T Negeen Pegahi, "Nuclear Weapons did not Embolden Pakistan: Drawing the Right Lessons for North Korea, January 22, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> R.G. Wirsing, *Kashmir In The Shadow of War: Regional Rivalries in a Nuclear Age* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire*, 97-98.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). According to Feroz Hasan Khan: “The US was applying pressure on Pakistan on four issues: signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), commencing negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), enacting export controls laws and placing nuclear and missile restraints on deployments and developments.”<sup>56</sup> There are a number of questions on what exactly happened at the Blair House? Why did the American team decide not to share the so-called intelligence report with anyone but the Pakistani Prime Minister? Why Bruce Riedel advised the American President to isolate Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmed?<sup>57</sup> What exactly was the disturbing evidence that indicated that Pakistanis were planning to deploy nuclear weapons?<sup>58</sup> Despite whatever happened between General Musharraf and Nawaz Sharif, why Nawaz Sharif never mentioned this allegation again or used this against General Musharraf? The founding Director General of Pakistan’s Strategic Plans Division (SPD), General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, raised a very important point in this regard. Accompanied by Brig. Feroz Hasan Khan, he met with an American team led by Robert Einhorn in Geneva on June 30, 1999. Seven years later, he asked, would he be in Geneva if Pakistan was planning to deploy nuclear weapons?<sup>59</sup>

In light of the above, then what exactly happened that was reported to President Clinton as a possible nuclear weapon deployment? General Kidwai is of the opinion that the American intelligence mistook the large truck movement at the Sargodha Airbase as a possible preparation for nuclear deployment. This was because according to the American sources, it is one of the storage areas for Pakistani nuclear equipment. This intelligence report echoed a similar alarmist approach that the American intelligence exhibited during the 1990 compound crisis.<sup>60</sup>

What further complicates the matter is that according to reports, India ordered the activation of its nuclear delivery vehicles to what they define as the “Readiness State 3.” According to detail, Readiness level 3 meant that the Indian nuclear weapons were readied for mating with the delivering

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<sup>56</sup> Khan, *Eating Grass*, 308.

<sup>57</sup> Bruce Riedel, “The 1999 Blair House Summit,” in Peter Lavoy, *Asymmetric War in South Asia*, 136-137.

<sup>58</sup> Riedel, “The 1999 Blair House Summit.”

<sup>59</sup> Khan, *Eating Grass*, 315.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

vehicles at very short notice once the leadership gave the go-ahead. For this purpose, four Prithvi ballistic missiles were readied and the Indian Mirages were also put on standby.<sup>61</sup> Why the American intelligence reports never mentioned these developments? Or they failed once again to detect what the Indians were doing?

Another important puzzle is if nuclear weapons played no role during this conflict, what stopped New Delhi from opening another front just like it did in response to the Operation Gibraltar in 1965? To understand why Delhi decided not to go for another front or expand the war is that it realised quite early that this Pakistan intrusion had provided it with an opportunity to regain its status and position in the eye of the international community.<sup>62</sup> India since 1998 nuclear tests was under sanctions under the UNSC Resolution 1172. Kargil conflict provided it with an avenue to change this. Another reason was that in the Indo-Pak context, Kargil was the first TV war. New Delhi used this to its maximum advantage. A fact acknowledged by the Kargil committee report. New Delhi's Kargil strategy focused on projecting itself as a victim of aggression and that it is a responsible nuclear weapons state.

In light of the above, one can safely conclude that the assumption that Kargil was a nuclear conflict is not only misplaced and flawed, it also raises several more questions than the answers it poses. Using the Kargil conflict and highlighting the flaws in the approach that it was a nuclear conflict, this paper highlighted the fact that there is a need to critically reexamine the criteria that lead to classify the conflict as — a nuclear crisis.

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<sup>61</sup> Raj Chengappa, *Weapons for Peace: The Secret Quest of India's Quest to Be a Nuclear Power* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 437.

<sup>62</sup> Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*, 65.