

Role of Signalling in Doctrinal Evolution: A Case Study of India-Pakistan Deterrence Equation

Farzana Siddique *

Abstract

Deterrence is more of a perception-game than a number-game, therefore, understanding an adversary's threat perception is important for the survivability of nuclear arsenal and deterrence stability. South Asian strategic stability largely depends on the nature of India-Pakistan deterrence equation. Effective communication of a state's capability and its resolve to deter its adversaries is central to the effective equation of deterrence. Hence, the instrument of signalling is practiced usually through various means at diplomatic and foreign policy levels. This study argues that the doctrinal-level asymmetry (a consequence of varied threat perceptions), between India and Pakistan, creates an ambiguity in the signalling game. This creates a space for overestimation of adversary's capabilities on each side which then disturbs deterrence stability. Theory of Signalling-Perception by Robert Jervis that deterrence is a game of perception has been employed in this paper to analyse the role of signalling and perception in the evolution of India-Pakistan declaratory nuclear policies — ultimately responsible for shaping the South Asian strategic stability.

Keywords: Signalling, Threat Perception, Asymmetric Doctrines, Deterrence Stability.

Introduction

South Asian deterrence stability largely depends on the nature of India-Pakistan strategic relationship. The military policies and postures of both neighbouring adversaries reflect their preference of maintaining credibility and capability of their respective deterrents through efficient signalling of their strategic choices. The diverging doctrinal postures shaped by asymmetric threat perceptions on both sides, ensuring a credible deterrent at

* The author is Lecturer, Department of International Relations, National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad.

conventional, strategic and tactical levels, complicates the situation even further. However, major determinants of threat perception on each side are the intentions embedded in the doctrines that are signalled using different means at different times and are usually perceived differently, thus, impacting each side's calculus of the credibility of the other's capability. This changes the estimates about other side's deterrent. It affects and shapes a state's own choices to ensure survivability of their own deterrent, hence the nature of stability at strategic level between India and Pakistan.

Rationality of this argument revolve around major tenants of *deterrence Theory* and the concepts of *Signalling* and *Perception* which are the essential constituents of deterrence stability. This implies that each actor's cost-benefit analysis and subsequent policy choices are crucial in shaping the adversary's behaviour, as actions of each are signals for the other — the clarity or ambiguity of signals directly influence how the threats are perceived. This draws reference from, and lends credence to, Robert Jervis' writings on the interdependent relation between the two phenomena i.e., signalling and perception. Jervis,¹ in his theoretical synthesis, brought together two strands of literature that had never been combined before despite being dependent on each other. Based on signalling-perception synthesis, this study argues that asymmetry and ambiguity, at doctrinal level, between nuclear adversaries affects the signalling game: overestimation or underestimation of adversary's capabilities and credibility may disturb deterrence stability as a consequence.

In this context, there are three basic assumptions that underlie the argument of this article:

- a) Limited understanding on the two sides regarding potential sources of threat shaping the other's threat calculus.
- b) A ambiguity or incorrect estimation of the other sides' capabilities (probably an outcome of ineffective signaling).
- c) Subsequent misinterpretation of the other side's intended behaviour towards oneself as a consequence of the first two — since one fails to comprehend what the other party feels most threatened from, against whom a set of capabilities is acquired.

¹ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychological of International Politics* (UK: Princeton University Press, 2017), 110-111.

These assumptions relate to the clarity of signals at declaratory and operational levels.²

To explore the significance of signalling, this article has been divided in three parts. The first forms the theoretical/conceptual base while the second explains the logic of signalling by identifying the doctrinal-level differences between India and Pakistan by analysing the rivals' discourses at declaratory policy level. The last section entails a discussion on India-Pakistan nuclear doctrines in light of the three core assumptions postulated above.

Conceptual Understanding

Signalling is an important determinant of deterrence theory which primarily relies on three Cs: Credibility, Capability and Communication.³ Signalling, as a part of communication, has received limited attention in the literature on deterrence stability in general and on strategic stability of South Asia in particular. In fact, the latter talks at length about credibility and capability of deterrent forces but hardly addresses signalling upon which both credibility and capability are dependent. For deterrence to work credibly, it is important for an actor to effectively communicate its capability as well as its resolve/intent to the adversaries.

Deterrence is, and has been, a viable strategy for achieving political objectives across the spectrum of conflict. It is dependent on the possibility of unacceptable use of force despite the understanding that nuclear is one of the factor on which deterrence relies.⁴ While explaining deterrence, Bernard Bordie said, "Deterrence means something as a strategic policy only when we are certain that the retaliatory instrument upon which it relies will not be called upon to function at all."⁵ In its simplest form, deterrence is based upon the idea of persuading a potential aggressor to not perform a certain

² Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Differences, Misperception and Deterrence Failure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 32.

³ Zafar Iqbal Cheema, *Indian Nuclear Deterrence: Its Evolution, Development and Implications for South Asian Security* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2010), 397.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James Chisem, "Nuclear Strategy and Deterrence: An Attempt to Rationalise the Irrational?," E-International Relations, April 18, 2011, <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/04/18/nuclear-strategy-and-deterrence-an-attempt-to-rationalise-the-irrational>

(un) desired action, through a threat of disproportionate punishment entirely unacceptable to that aggressor.⁶

Understanding an adversary's credibility and capability is important for the conduct of policy at the diplomatic level. Therefore, the motivation of adversaries is central to both success or failure of strategic coercion since it affects a state's credibility and willingness to fight with its adversary. Only when the defender is capable of inflicting huge loss on the potential challenger and generates a credible threat, the expected outcomes will be less desirable than the status quo for the latter.⁷ It must be believed by the challenger that the defender has the motivation to accept the costs of aggression, and also the capacity to enact the threatened use of force.

The nuclear weapons capability needs to be reliable, survivable, and must have a capacity to retaliate if and when required. Therefore, deterrence requires a credibility of capability not only in the possessor's view but also in the adversary's perception. This demonstrates a state's potential of conducting a retaliatory second strike after suffering from first strike. The second strike capability adds immense credibility to the deterrent force.

Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke stressed the importance of credibility at qualitative level where the challenger's perception of the credibility of the defendant's commitment is crucial.⁸ According to George and Smoke, there are eight factors that are responsible for successful deterrent policies: clarity of policy objectives, robust reasoning, asymmetric motivation, sense of determination, strong leadership, domestic support, international support, fear of offensive use of force and precision of words used by adversary. All of them are related to the credibility of signals.⁹

The third important element of deterrence theory is purposive communication, constructed and understood as signalling — a central

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jesse C. Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds and AhraWu, "Capability, Credibility and Extended General Deterrence, International Interactions," *International Interactions Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, vol.41, issue 2, Taylor & Francis Online, 2015.

⁸ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, "Deterrence and Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, vol. 41, no. 2, Cambridge University Press (Jan 1989):170-182.

⁹ Robert Jervis, "Review: Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, vol.31, no.2, Cambridge University Press (Jan 1979).

theme of this article. Signalling Theory deals with fundamental principle of communication: how can a *receiver* determine whether the *signaller/sender* is telling the truth or it is just a means to convey the state of affairs meant/intended to create misperception.¹⁰ The signals are the instrument of purposive communication and may include any perceptible characters of an agent, intentionally presented for the purpose of raising the likelihood assigned by the receiver to a certain state of affairs.

A necessary condition for the effective use of a signal is that the senders and receivers interpret it in the same way.¹¹ Robert Jervis identifies the limitation of Signalling Theory since it neglects the receiver perception. To overcome this limitation, Jervis conceptualised the theory of perception to establish a comprehensive picture of the sender-receiver relationship. Before explaining the role of doctrinal differences at perceptual level in weak signalling between India and Pakistan, Signalling-Perception unified theories and model of Signalling game needs to be explained.¹²

The Theory of Perception ignores the fact that the perceiver realises that a sender's signal can have strategic objectives, ignoring or deceiving it may be faulty. Though, after pointing out the limitations of both theories, drawing a nexus between them made it easier to understand the relationship between signalling and perception. It is believed that if the objectives of state A and state B are identical, establishing a connection between signals and perception would be easy. However, if the objectives are divergent (or if they clash at declaratory and operational level), the risk of misperception is potentially predominant. For the credibility of deterrence, it is important for nuclear adversaries to signal their capabilities explicitly to avoid escalation.¹³ Developing a robust signalling mechanism is a complex task and even more so during a crisis, whereby the misperception of any one of the signals might lead to conflict escalation.

¹⁰ Diego Gambetta, "Signalling," *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, eds., Peter Headstrom and Peter Hearnman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 169-170.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Peter Godfrey-Smith, "Sender-Receiver Systems Within and Between Organisms," *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 81, no. 5 (December 2014).

¹³ Ibid.

Due to the issues associated with complexity of perception and difficulties in communication, Jervis believes that signalling can be susceptible to ambiguity. It is that perceptual predispositions of the actors vary and are beyond the receiver's knowledge it would be easier if actors had similar predispositions to understand the purpose and influence of the signals received.¹⁴

Doctrines and Signalling

Doctrine is a set of ideas outlining the circumstances under which a state would desire a purposive utilisation of its conventional or strategic forces. A nuclear doctrinal policy addresses the use of nuclear weapons at two levels: the declaratory and operational level.¹⁵ At the declaratory level, a doctrine reflects the objectives of the use of force. At the operational level, it elaborates on how nuclear weapons would be used by delineating the deployment patterns, target range and diversity in a way that would lend credibility to a state's weapons.

The states usually declare their capabilities to influence their opponent's strategic strength, but the impact of these efforts on their adversaries tend to be uncertain and fluctuating. States' various kinds of demonstrations of their power are anticipated, at least in part, to improve the perceptions of outsiders and reinforce the credibility of their deterrent power. Both sides' perceptions of credibility lead to strengthening of deterrence stability. For these reasons, nuclear doctrines at declaratory level are central to maintaining deterrence stability between nuclear weapon states. Hence, dedicated efforts of the states in terms of signalling their postures which aim to shape the opponents' perceptions of the credibility of the senders capabilities acquires a significant position in the deterrence equation.

There are three assumptions with regards to signalling of capabilities and intentions overtly or covertly. The first school of thought maintains that the states prefer not to display new weapons, sensitive programmers, or advanced technologies because revealing such capabilities can undermine their advantageous position in the event of future conflictual engagements.

¹⁴ Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Differences, Misperception and Deterrence Failure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 32.

¹⁵ David O. Smith, "The Management of Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal," *The Non-Proliferation Review*, vol. 21., no. 3-4 (December 2014): 286.

Here, the states avoid demonstrating their capabilities based on their perception of the reputation of the adversary state.¹⁶ Second assumption is that the states should demonstrate the best of their capabilities to enhance deterrent status and build their image at both local and international levels.¹⁷ The third assumption suggests that capability demonstration and show of force plays a crucial role in adding strength to an actor's bargaining potential. The prevailing literature on the crisis bargaining and crisis management strategies entails this assumption.¹⁸

India-Pakistan Case

India-Pakistan nuclear doctrines are important indicators shaping deterrence stability in South Asia. Their nuclear doctrines are generally viewed as ambiguous in nature as their relative military power and strategies differ significantly. Any change in the declaratory policy of each side reflects a shift in its intentions and perceptions towards the other. Therefore, the discourse over India and Pakistan's declaratory policies cannot be overlooked when trying to analyse the stability at strategic level in the region. The available discourse and research analyses the declaratory policies of both states from a policy perspective and also theorises the South Asian strategic environment based on such declarations. This part of the paper details India and Pakistan's doctrines which have been made public; followed by an examination of role of threat perception in the two counterparts' declaratory policies which remains largely unaddressed in the existing discourses on deterrence.

To examine the policy preferences of the neighbouring nuclear adversaries, first it is important to identify the key doctrinal attributes at declaratory level. India-Pakistan doctrinal discourse is explicitly dominated by Cold War references. The main nuclear lexicons and concepts at policy level have been adopted from the Cold War literature where the US and the Soviet Union made choices to either show or conceal the credibility of their strategic weapons to the other side — the rationale for choices determined by their respective threat perceptions. Since the end of the Cold War, the

¹⁶ Evan Braden Montgomery, "Signals of Strength: Capability Demonstrations and Perceptions of Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, published on June 14, 2019.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Russian and American demonstration of their capabilities has been determined by each side's mis/perceptions and false assumptions regarding other's intentions resulting from what and how the other signals. It appears that each side may have overestimated the other's military advantage at strategic level. For example, Pavel Podvig concluded:

US estimates significantly overestimated the accuracy that Soviet missiles were able to demonstrate in the 1970s and early 1980s...[O]nly in 1991 did the Soviet Union hardly reach the counterforce capability that the US intelligence community reported it had achieved a decade earlier. Whereas one of the gravest errors of the Soviet Union was: "An attribution of first strike strategy to the United States and suspecting that Washington in the early 1980s might be preparing to implement this strategy."¹⁹

The lessons which are learned from the experiences of nuclear rivals during the Cold War are important to recognise the role that the signalling plays in building the adversary's perception and its assessment of the other side's intentions, capabilities and policies at declaratory level. This framework can be replicated to South Asia where trust deficit between India and Pakistan does not allow either the signals that the sender sends to remain credible or the receiver's perception of these signals to be accurate. This type of misunderstanding of each side's values, misinterpretation of intended behaviour, incorrect beliefs about the other's strength,²⁰ and failure to comprehend the other side well, results in the choices aimed at deceiving the other, as evident in the case of India-Pakistan 'Signalling-Perception framework.' Though India announced and published draft nuclear doctrine, there is a lack of clarity over its intentions at declaratory policy level. Pakistan, because of its limited deterrent capability, adopted ambiguity as a source of strength.

Role of Threat Perception in Shaping Doctrines

Effective signalling is a function of the perceptual dispositions of both sender and receiver. Failing in achieving the signalling political objectives which are basis of the respective nuclear postures complicates the India-

¹⁹ Pavel Podvig, "The Window of Vulnerability: That Wasn't: Soviet Military Buildup in the 1970's: A Research Note," *International Security*, vol. 33, no.1 (Summer 2008):118-138.

²⁰ Alexander George and Richard Smoke in Christopher P. Twomey (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010),

Pakistan relations and the regional deterrence equation. The prevalent ambiguity in signalling of India-Pakistan doctrines and declarations stems from the two sides' asymmetric threat perceptions which are not well understood by either of the sides.

The Indian threat perception emanates from the dilemma of being caught between two nuclear-capable states China and Pakistan. Islamabad has been India's traditional adversary and China is seen by India as the competitor-cum-potential adversary in times of recurring tensions. This dilemma makes it hard for Indian decision makers to fully demonstrate their capabilities or to communicate the credibility of its deterrent force, since the two sources of perceived threats might interpret any action in contradictory ways. This further complicates the perception of the adversaries. It becomes hard to identify if the perceived threat is genuine or just a false alarm. This was manifested in early Indian official statements which did not mark a specific adversary state as a source of threat. However, Prime Minister Vajpayee, while communicating with President Clinton on May 11, 1998, marked China as a source affecting India's actions. He has secretly written, "We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders...A state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. India has adopted a political and security rationale for the justification of its strategic weapon decisions as a response to threats from Pakistan and China."²¹

In response to Indian nuclear test, Pakistan's nuclear tests was rationalised as an attempt to affirm its national deterrent against Indian nuclear coercion, as stating self-restraint — parallel to the language used by India. Pakistan's response to India's nuclear compulsion left no doubts about two significant differences in the essential approaches. First, while Indian officials largely avoided the identification of adversaries posing threat at strategic level, Pakistan clearly identified the threat posed by India that needed to be addressed by strategic weapons due to conventional imbalance. Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif in his speech to the National Defence College on May 20, 1999 stated that:

²¹ Cable from Chinese Embassy in India, "India's Reactions to China's Nuclear Test 1964," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

²¹ Ibid.

...in maintaining the nuclear deterrence, we remain acutely conscious of the risks and responsibilities arising from the possession of nuclear weapons....Nuclear restraint, stabilisation and minimum credible deterrence constitute the basic elements of Pakistan's nuclear policy.²²

The ambiguity and asymmetry, prevailing at the level of threat perception, generates false or inaccurate signals about each side's intentions, further complicating the two sides' estimates of the capability and credibility of the other. This, in turn, creates ambiguity about the policy choices of both states, thus altering the conceptualisation of deterrence stability at regional level. Secondly, Pakistan after overt nuclearisation deliberately adopted a policy of maintaining ambiguity so as to retain an element of surprise by keeping the adversary uncertain of its intentions at nuclear policy level.²³

Pakistan's Threat Perception and Doctrinal Evolution

Pakistan's nuclear use doctrine and posture has been a subject of intense debate at domestic, regional and international levels. Having tested nuclear weapons in May 1998, Pakistan publicly did not announce its nuclear-use doctrine in a documented form. However, by referring to public statements, interviews of government officials and other stake holders and operational strategies, the important features of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine were perceptible. To contextualise Pakistan's intention and its perception towards its adversary, it is important to analyse how decision-makers identified and interpreted the threats at doctrinal level.

As clearly established, Pakistan maintained a policy of denial regarding having a nuclear weapons programme prior to 1998, largely to avoid international pressure. However, soon after the Indian tests and their declaration of the 1999 draft nuclear doctrine, Pakistan came up with clearer policy guidelines vis-à-vis the existential Indian threat at

²² Rodey W. Jones, "Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview, Final Report, Defence Threat Reduction Agency," *Advanced System and Concepts Office* (October 1, 2001), 27.

²³ Zafar Khan, *Pakistan Nuclear Policy: A Credible Minimum Deterrence* (Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, July 14, 2014), 57, Also see Rodey W. Jones, "Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview," Final Report *Defence Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office*, Policy Architects International Reston, VA 2019, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/129048/southasia.pdf>

strategic level.²⁴ The first attribute of Pakistan's doctrine, entailed in the first official stance on its deterrence posture was published in an article,²⁵ making the case for a minimum deterrence posture at official level:

Minimum deterrence has been and should continue to be the guiding principle of Pakistan's nuclear pursuit. Of course minimum cannot be defined in static numbers. In the absence of mutual restraints, the size of Pakistan's arsenal and its deployment pattern have to be adjusted, to ward off dangers of pre-emption and interception. Only then can deterrence remain efficacious.²⁶

Pakistan claims to pursue minimum deterrence against its adversary without necessarily expanding nuclear and conventional forces, while on the other hand it equally emphasises that the minimum is not 'static and dormant.' Until the term minimum is fully specified, ambiguity and complexity will remain the focal points of Pakistan's deterrence doctrine to maintain credibility at a 'minimum' level. However, Pakistan's stance on minimum deterrence and its complexity is difficult to understand, as the term 'minimum' is not fully qualified, yet a number of officials have tried to qualify this term. The then Foreign Secretary, Abdul Sattar stated:

The concept of minimum deterrence is not static and fixed. It changes in accordance with the changed strategic reality. The estimated number of nuclear forces Pakistan possessed in 2000 would not be sufficient in 2012 in accordance with the logic of minimum deterrence. To meet the requirements of minimum, the minimum should meet the traditional parameters of the deterrence. The minimum has to be credible. As long as minimum is credible, the number can be any. Minimum, if credible, has worked in the past. It should work now and in the future.²⁷

²⁴ Naeem Salik, "Pakistan Nuclear Force Structure in 2025," *Regional Insight Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (June 30, 2016).

²⁵ Abdul Sattar, "Pakistan's Response to the Indian Nuclear Doctrine," (Speech, Islamabad Council on World Affairs and the Islamabad Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (November 25, 1999) quoted in Bhumitra Chakma, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 50. Speech excerpt archived at Pakistan Nuclear, Federation of American Scientists, and November 1999.

²⁶ Naeem Salik, "Pakistan Nuclear Force Structure in 2025," June 30, 2016.

²⁷ Zafar Khan, *Pakistan Nuclear Policy: A Credible Minimum Deterrence* (July 14, 2014), 57.

Pakistan's rationale for keeping credible minimum deterrence is based on the threats perceived from the Indian nuclear programme. This is manifested through statements made by the government officials and stakeholders regarding India's conventional force modernisation, meant for operationalising the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD). Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA) stated:

That "the conventional balance in South Asia is extremely important to maintain peace in the region." Whereas Strategic Plan Division (SPD) have suggested that Islamabad's inability to keep pace with New Delhi's military build-up has increased the pressure to expand Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to include low-yield warheads and short-range missiles such as the 60km Nasr.²⁸

All of these commitments indicate that the *minimum that would be credible* is not a static concept. In fact, it would vary along with the improvement in India's deterrent force structure. Since 2006, the nuclear policy predicated on the principle of 'Minimum Credible Deterrence' (MCD) has undergone gradual evolution. After the signing of India-US strategic partnership agreement, that envisaged the two counterparts' nuclear and ballistic missile defence cooperation, Pakistan's anxieties and growing concerns were elaborated in the 2006 NCA press statement:

India-US agreement would enable India to produce significant quantities of fissile material and nuclear weapons from unsafeguarded nuclear reactors, the NCA expressed firm resolve that our credible minimum deterrence requirements will be met.²⁹

On May 21, 2009, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, while linking the military procurement of India with lowering of nuclear threshold stated, "The acquisitions of sophisticated weaponry by our neighbour will disturb the conventional balance between two countries and hence, lower the nuclear threshold."³⁰ In September 2013, NCA mentioned that Pakistan's deterrent posture relies on the policy of CMD, but, to deter all forms of aggression, it will also maintain policy of Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) capability with CMD. Moreover, the Foreign Ministry

²⁸ Ladwig III, "Indian Military Modernisation and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol.38, no. 5 (May 2015).

²⁹ Pakistan Top Nuclear Command Concerned Over India-US deal, Space War, April 13, 2006.

³⁰ Ladwig III, "Indian Military Modernisation."

announced that Pakistan's "nuclear deterrence capability is aimed at maintaining regional stability in South Asia."³¹ General Kidwai, while speaking in a conference took a similar stance when he affirmed that Pakistan's nuclear journey began with the principle of CMD. However, he reiterated, it gradually transformed towards a full spectrum posture, which has been further stimulated by the Indian attempts for finding 'space for conventional war'.³²

In February 2016, NCA asserted that nuclear deterrence is an "element of stability" in the region. Therefore, Pakistan will continue to "maintain policy of FSD in line with the policy of CMD".³³ Pakistan's policy choice shaped by India-centric threat perception demonstrates its compliance to the minimal deterrence posture and inherently bound to the size and composition of evolving Indian arsenal. This implies that Pakistan focuses on developing the capability of placing India's main cities at risk.

However, the discourse available on Pakistan's addition of FSD to its CMD posture signals divergent goals and force requirements needed to achieve what is being conceptually envisioned — the following statement depicts it well:

Credible minimum deterrence is essentially a variety of simple punishment deterrence (counter value targets) whereas full spectrum deterrence is a kind of deterrence by denial which include (counterforce) which require a larger arsenal size and a greater variety of both warheads and delivery systems with comparatively higher operational preparedness levels than the minimum credible deterrence posture.³⁴

These characteristics of variants of MCD have never been proclaimed officially, but the above discourse-based assessment qualifies the merits of each variant. Acceptance of asymmetric restraints and size of arsenals in comparison to a bigger adversary explains the non-static

³¹ "Pakistan Maintains Stance on Nuclear Non-Proliferation," *Gulf News Pakistan*, April 18, 2006.

³² General Khalid Kidwai in conversation with Peter Levoy, *Carnegie Nuclear Policy Conference*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC (March 23, 2015).

³³ ISPR Press Release No. PR64/2016-ISPR, February 24, 2016,

³⁴ Naeem Salik, Pakistan Nuclear Force Structure in 2025, *Regional Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2016.

nature of MCD posture which might be interpreted as arms race, depending on the decision makers' perceptual predispositions.

The second important attribute of Pakistan nuclear doctrine is its First Use Nuclear posture. Pakistan, in its initial doctrinal commitments, remained silent on the policy of nuclear No First Use (NFU) rather than following Indian footsteps. Keeping this in view, India's military edge and fundamental vulnerabilities of Pakistan, Islamabad chose not to have NFU policy instead adopted a first use policy to serve its best interests amidst an asymmetric strategic equation.³⁵ Pakistan's commitment to First Use Policy further endorsed its stated logic underlying the non-static nature of its minimum credible deterrent. It also signalled its intentions that Pakistan reserves decision on whether to hold back use of nuclear weapon in response to the Indian offence at conventional level with or without nuclear weapons.

The third tenet of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, restraint and responsibility, depends on the first two. However, it appears paradoxical to explain this attribute along with the dynamic declaratory policies about one's nuclear deterrent. India-Pakistan, with their dynamic and asymmetric threat perception, cannot conclude what exactly would be the right time to restraint themselves from not engaging in a deadly arms race. Pakistan's official stance suggests that practicing restraint and responsibility will depend on how the country perceives India's intention. India's intent and actions have continuously evolved because of its bidirectional security dilemma and its over-ambitious drive to achieve the great power status.

India's Doctrinal Attributes: Evolution and Signalling

After the 1998 overt nuclear tests, India announced its nuclear policy in the form of a Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board in August of 1999.³⁶ The document has not yet been recognised as an authorised official document which underestimates its validity and the credibility as India's

³⁵ Rodey W. Jones, "Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview," Final Report, Defence Threat Reduction Agency, *Advanced System and Concepts Office* (October 1, 2001), 27. Also see, Naeem Salik, *Pakistan Nuclear Force*.

³⁶ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine and Capabilities," *International Security*, vol.43, no.3 (Winter 2018/19):7-5.

trust-worthy declaratory commitments. In January 2003, India issued its official nuclear doctrine.³⁷ This official version projected the Indian intentions to acquire a nuclear force triad while reinforcing the commitments made in the draft doctrine. However, the 2003 version was a departure from the earlier ones in highlighting the potential for using nuclear force in response to a non-nuclear (particularly biological or chemical weapons) attack.³⁸ Since India has not fully articulated many of the details of its nuclear choices at policy level, the ambiguities have remained prevalent even after publishing the official doctrine.

The core features of Indian nuclear declaratory policy have evolved to include: No First Use policy (rendered less credible following dubious statements over the matter made by public office holders), force structure based on MCD and postures based on tenets of *retaliation with use of massive force* and *assurance of survivability of retaliatory forces in response to adversary's aggression*.³⁹ The 2003 official Indian draft nuclear doctrine entailed three substantial changes:

- a) Responding to a first strike with nuclear retaliation aimed and designed to inflict unacceptable and massive damage.⁴⁰
- b) Adversary's nuclear attack on Indian forces anywhere would qualify as a justification for nuclear retaliation.⁴¹
- c) Nuclear retaliation would remain an option for responding to an outbreak of chemical or biological weapons against India or its forces.⁴²

This revision in the declaratory policy illustrates the need for maintaining credibility of deterrent at all levels against all perceived threats. The 2003 doctrine signalled India's policy choices along with the conditions that may justify massive retaliation against any type of attack no matter strategic, chemical or biological. These policy options are a reflection of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rodey W. Jones, "Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview," Final Report, Defence Threat Reduction Agency, *Advanced System and Concepts Office* (October 1, 2001).

⁴⁰ Devin T. Hagerty, "India's Evolving Nuclear Posture," *The Non-Proliferation Review*, vol. 21, no. 3-4 (December 2014): 300.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Indian intentions vis-à-vis the adversaries it perceives a threat from, in the event of future military misadventure.

First attribute of India's doctrine is MCD which just like Pakistan is dynamic and non-static in nature since it is a perceptual product of two-sided threats from two adversaries, Pakistan and China. After India's overt declaration of acquisition nuclear weapons technology and test in May 1998, Prime Minister Vajpayee asserted in his May 27 statement before the Indian parliament that, "India's security environment had deteriorated and it needed nuclear weapons to prevent coercion or blackmail."⁴³ The Prime Minister did not exactly mention the source from which the greatest threat was perceived and for whom these signals as a nuclear weapon state were meant — Pakistan or China? He further emphasised India's policy of self-restraint but, in his early statements, the term minimum deterrence has not been used⁴⁴ which he first endorsed in front of the Indian parliament, "India would seek only a minimum but credible, nuclear deterrent and the term 'credible' being an important qualifier."⁴⁵

A policy level, India like Pakistan preferred to keep CMD an open-ended concept where minimum was not strictly qualified. Former Commander of Indian Strategic Forces Command Lieutenant General B. S. Nagal, stated:

...with a policy of No First Use and Massive Retaliation, the concept of CMD must factor in 'survivability and sufficient numbers' that can inflict unacceptable damage....the actual size of the arsenal associated with CMD has to be dynamic, because, the adversaries' arsenals are increasing by the year.⁴⁶

It was the same thinking which, amidst evolving regional security environment and changing nature of threats, made India look for possibilities of waging a war with limited use of conventional force

⁴³ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine and Capabilities, International Security," vol.43, no.3 (Winter 2018/19): 16-21. Also see Rajesh Raja Goplan, Indian's Nuclear Doctrine Debate, June, *Regional Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (30, 2016).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Rodey W. Jones Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia: An Overview, Final Report, Defence Threat Reduction Agency, *Advanced System and Concepts Office* (October 1, 2001), 25.

⁴⁶ Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas."

without crossing nuclear threshold. Hence, the formulation of CSD as an effort to manoeuvre between deterrence and compellence came into being in the wake of Parakram operation. Rajesh M. Basrur analysed Indian choices noting that India has opened an avenue of an open-ended future in which a conception of minimum deterrence will no longer be the solitary plank of nuclear policy.

The second important attribute of Indian declared doctrine — most debated in recent times due to contradictions at declaratory and operation policy levels — is the NFU policy complemented by the need of having a Second Strike Capability. Though at the official-declaratory level, Indian claims show a continued NFU commitment, the degree of comprehensiveness and non-conditionality of the Indian pledges has reduced, since the statements of public-office holders refer to diverging operational details and preferences.

As early as 2002, Bharat Karnard, in opposition to Indian NFU policy argued that such a posture only suits a state having “extreme confidence not only in the survivability of its national nuclear forces sufficient to muster a devastating retaliatory strike, but also in the efficacy of its crisis management system,”⁴⁷ which according to him was not India’s forte. He further referred to the inherent incapacity of India’s bureaucratic system for ‘dealing with any emergency as dire as a nuclear strike’ meaning that a nuclear first strike would be difficult to absorb. He has called NFU as ‘unenforceable’ because the nuclear deterrent is not meant solely for a second strike. This implies that claiming NFU as an operational may only be possible at declaratory level whether it is meant to conceal its intentions and bluff the adversary or to avoid undue international pressures and outrage.⁴⁸

In a speech in 2010, the then national security adviser, Shiv Shankar Menon stated that India’s doctrine is “no first use against non-nuclear weapon states,” implying that NFU does not apply to nuclear-armed powers.⁴⁹ Later in 2013, Shayam Saran, Chairperson of India’s non-statutory National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) increased the confusion over India’s NFU pledge by stating that a strike with tactical or

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16-21.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Shivshankar Menon, “The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs,” *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, October 21, 2010.

nuclear weapons won't be differentiated amongst i.e. either will be seen as a first-strike on Indian territory and forces, inviting 'massive retaliation' with nuclear weapons as Indian response.⁵⁰

A major intent to reduce India's reliance on NFU was indicated in 2014, during the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election campaign. BJP promised to update and revamp the country's nuclear policy by making it relevant to the contemporary challenges. Many considered it as referring to alteration of India's NFU commitment. However, despite the stance being quickly denied, there have been repeated statements by prominent Indian officials that make analysts foresee a shift in the country's no-first-use pledges.⁵¹

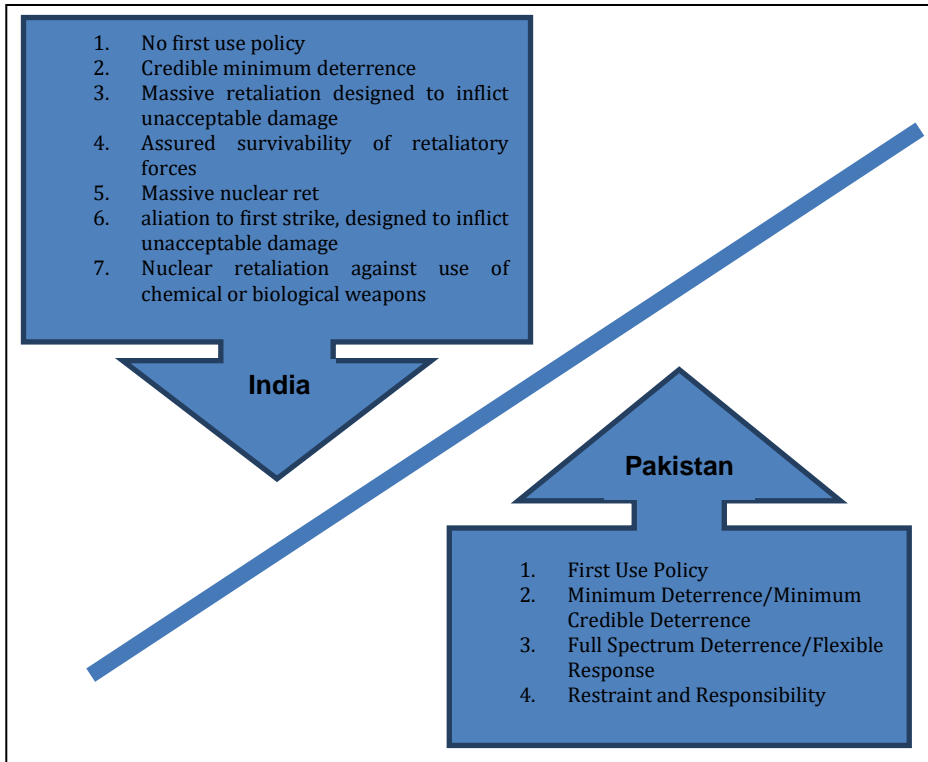
Although NFU remains controversial element of India's nuclear doctrine, other doctrinal features such as massive retaliation and responding to non-nuclear first strike (including Pakistan's reported tactical weapons' acquisition) are also contested. For instance, the third important tenet of the 2003 doctrine, that was not present in the draft doctrine of 1999 is the space for punitive retaliation in response to an attack on Indian forces using either chemical or biological weapons. Though this aspect is not as hotly debated as NFU and CMD, it is still relevant to India's extra-regional or global ambitious and strategies.⁵² The above discussion shows that the Indian policy makers have sporadically debated India's nuclear policy choices for almost over a decade, but the debate so far has been inconclusive.

⁵⁰ Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine and Capabilities." Also see Rajesh Raja Goplan, "Indian's Nuclear Doctrine Debate," June, *Regional Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (30, 2016).

⁵¹ Rodey W. Jones, *Minimum Credible Deterrence Postures in South Asia*:

⁵² Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine and Capabilities."

Figure No. 1
Asymmetry in Doctrinal Aspects of India and Pakistan



Findings and Analysis

Deterrence is more about perception of adversary's intent than the actual magnitude of its forces. Understanding the standpoint from which the adversary's threat perception is being shaped is important to make nuclear deterrence work effectively while ensuring deterrence stability for a long period of time. Signalling, which may entail conveyance of both real as well as deceptive images, is central in shaping one's perception of other's intent. How signals are perceived is based on the sender's behaviour, clarity of the signal, and the receiver's predispositions about the sender (reputation of adversary) that shape the interpretations of the sender's intent.

After developing an understanding of the key attributes of India-Pakistan nuclear doctrines and their evolution over the period of time, the intentions and perceptual dispositions of both are now analysed in line with

theoretical assumptions made at the start of the study. In last few years, a number of security threats have emerged in the region, and both states were destined to recalibrate their threat matrix' in accordance with these changes. The changing environment has led to a transformed threat perception on the two sides, that each side has communicated to the other. This is evident from several official statements issued by each side.

An emerging threat of terrorism perpetrated by non-state actors (either self-motivated or acting as proxies) complicates the regional environment for both India and Pakistan. This factor complicates their deterrence equation. Pakistan's nuclear policy, amidst these evolving threats, has remained centered around traditional threats. It is that the country has retained its MCD posture with little alteration — the deterrent's scope has been broadened to include tactical nuclear weapons while remaining committed to MCD. Contrarily, the 2003 Indian official policy appears to be addressing the non-traditional threats emanating from outside region, too where it calls for retaliating to chemical and biological weapons attacks.

Pakistan's interpretation of deterrence as a dynamic concept leads it to look at the capabilities and military strength of its adversary and maintaining what it considers a rough strategic equilibrium. India's signalling of its intentions to further amass conventional capability (particularly CSD) and its growing military alliances with the major powers⁵³ have been perceived by Pakistan as a threat to deterrence stability. In line with this perceptual disposition, Pakistan's interpretation of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) has undergone revision, as reflected in a number of statements made by the officials. Such perceptions and beliefs tend to disturb and transform the existing doctrinal attributes.

In response to India's conventional advantage signalled through CSD, Pakistan tried to revamp its stance on deterrence at minimum level. The confusion was first created through official statements made by ISPR, where the word "minimum" was omitted from the phrase 'credible minimum deterrence' and was further conjoined with the notion of FSD.

⁵³ Hans M. Kristense and Matt Korda, "Indian Nuclear Forces, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (Nov 2018), 361-366, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2018.1533162. For this also see Indo-US Nuclear Deal July 18, 2005, Indian Ballistic Missile System, Indian increasing Stockpiles etc.

MCD is considered as a non-static doctrinal posture because of asymmetric threat perception prevailing in India-Pakistan deterrence equation. This non-static nature of maintaining a minimum deterrent signals the other's intentions for building more arms which reinforces misperception.

At force posture level, both states also maintain ambiguity and asymmetry. Ambiguity of the signals further adds to misperception and misunderstanding, thus reinforcing security dilemma. Pakistan, with its limited conventional force has constantly maintained the notion of first use. However, the recent Indian debate on inefficacy of having a NFU policy confuses the adversaries. This uncertainty and confusion results in constantly evolving nuclear doctrines.

The doctrine of flexibility appears to be at play on both sides when one tries to qualify the minimum deterrent needed. The word *credible* was added only in later stages to their minimum deterrence postures indicating credibility of deterrent as the yardstick to qualify the minimum that is required. And what is credible for each side depends on their asymmetric threat perceptions. Keeping in view the flexible nature of both states' doctrines, the terms like 'modest use of triads' and 'credibility of minimum deterrence posture' are indicative of the intentions towards covert arms race — as signalled through various statements.

Conclusion

This study has both academic and policy level significance since most of the available literature on India-Pakistan deterrence stability deals with explaining the determinants of its success and failure, ranging from nuclear capability, credibility, doctrines and force postures and role of international regimes. The role that India and Pakistan's asymmetric threat calculus play in signalling intentions and shaping perceptions, which then act to transform both sides' doctrinal attributes, has remained somewhat underexplored. When two states have asymmetry at doctrinal level, they will be more likely to misinterpret each other's capabilities relative to their own threat perceptions. Ultimately, these misperceptions will affect their relationship.

Tracing the evolution of both states' declaratory nuclear policies, over last two decades indicates that their positions have remained constant on some of the issues and have been constantly evolving or focus to dispute

regarding other issues. It has been observed that the policy preferences of each side call for maintaining a credible deterrent at minimum level. However, this simple preference gets complicated because the asymmetric threat matrix since none of the party has interpreted or understood correctly each other's perception, thus leading to ambiguity of signals (messages and discourse related to doctrinal attributes) sent and received. Both sides have adopted minimum credible deterrence.

This signalling game puts India and Pakistan in a vicious circle of perception and misperception where one side's actions and intentions lead to misperception on the other side. Over a longer period of time, the recurring historical experiences, too, become a factor influencing signalling and perception. This ambiguity of strategic signalling contributes to destabilising rather than stabilising the regional deterrence architecture — hence the fluctuating South Asian strategic stability.