

## Nuclear Deterrence: A complete failure at Kargil

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### Abstract

There is a perception since long that the nuclear weapon states cannot opt for war against each other. The proponents of nuclear deterrence quote the example of the United States and Soviet Union to strengthen their view point that the two major world powers didn't opt for direct confrontation during the cold war era. This concept failed to get its legitimacy after a limited war between the two South Asian nuclear weapon states in 1999. Kargil war directly challenged the proliferation optimists and forced them to change their perceptions on the nuclear deterrence theory. This article looks at the role of nuclear deterrence in averting war between India and Pakistan at Kargil. It finds that nuclear deterrence failed to avert Kargil war and the nuclearization of South Asia further contributed in the worsening of the crisis due to different understandings of the nuclear deterrence theory on the two sides. It also finds that it was international community's pressure which forced the two states to bring their forces to normal positions.

### Introduction

The proponents of nuclear deterrence theory claimed that the two major nuclear weapon states involved in cold war did not opt for the direct confrontation with each other. But its opponents indicate that the same period witnessed a large number conflicts and casualties worldwide. (McCoy, 1999) The proliferation pessimists further quote the example of limited war fought between India and Pakistan with more than 1500 casualties. They state that the Kargil war has forced the proliferation optimists to change their perceptions in connection to the nuclear deterrence theory.

Kargil war between the two nuclear weapon states occurred when Pakistan launched a covert military operation sending its forces to take control of the heights at Kashmir in 1999. Pakistani soldiers entered into Indian territory and took control of the mountainous heights at Kargil. India alleged Pakistan that it has captured Indian positions at Kargil while Pakistan rejected the allegation and stated that Kashmiri mujahidin are fighting at Kargil and it has nothing to do with it. Indians responded rapidly by sending large number of troops on the border to counter Pakistani soldiers. Indian Air Force also bombed the positions captured by Pakistani soldiers. India threatened to go to any extent against Pakistan. The situation worsened when Pakistan also brought its troops on the border and prepared itself for war. The things were worsening with the passing time.

Looking at the sensitivity of the situation, the international community started playing its role in reducing tension between the two South Asian nuclear weapon states. The United States played a very important role in convincing the both sides that any war between the two countries will have disastrous results.

Pakistan, under an extreme pressure from the international community withdrew its forces from Kargil and vacated Indian positions. The things started coming to normalcy when both sides agreed to bring their forces to normal positions. The international community played a very important role in reducing the tension between these two nuclear powers.

### Kargil War: A Detailed Overview

India and Pakistan became successful in testing nuclear weapons in 1998. The perceptions of the two countries were changed after their overt nuclearization. Pakistan thought that now it has become successful to have balance with India on the one hand and got an opportunity to fulfill its long standing intentions to alter region's boundaries on the other. Nuclear optimists perceived that the things were going to be improved between the two states after their overt nuclearization and there would be no more chances of war between South Asian nuclear weapon states. Their claim was on the basis that the nuclear war can prove to be so disastrous and no state can afford to opt for it but it didn't do so.

The perceptions of India and Pakistan in connection to the understanding of nuclear deterrence were something different. India perceived that the nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan has ended the chances of any nuclear conflict between the two states while the chances of a conventional war were still there. Therefore, India has kept the option of conventional war open against its main rival. Pakistan's perception on the other side is something different from Indian perspective. Pakistan perceived that it will be using nuclear weapons if its integrity will be at stake. Pakistan was also not willing to have an agreement with India not to have first nuclear strike. Pakistan perceived that nuclear deterrence has ended the chances of any conventional war in the region between the two states because of their nuclear capabilities. Pakistan also perceived that the nuclear deterrence has given it a very good opportunity to initiate any adventure against India to fulfill its longstanding intentions to alter the boundaries of the region.

The conflict started between the two states when Pakistan initiated a covert military operation and sent

its forces on the border region at Kashmir to take control of Kargil heights. Pakistani forces moved into Indian territory and occupied the heights at Kargil sector. It was shocking news for India as both India and Pakistan have seen the episode of improvement in their relations through diplomacy between the two countries when Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Wajpai and Pakistan's Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif were having strong moves to improve relations of the two states. India responded quickly by sending its large number of forces on the border. India alleged Pakistan for sending its forces at Kargil to control Indian territory while Pakistan rejected Indian allegation by arguing that there is no one of its soldiers at Kargil and claimed that Kashmiri mujahidin are fighting over there for the cause of liberating Kashmir. (Kapur, 2005) Indian Air Force also started bombing Pakistani soldiers at Kargil. Pakistan also responded in the same way and brought a large number of its troops at the border. The situation worsened between the two states. The clashes between the two states reached at height. The war seemed to be a real possibility between the two states as the numbers of the casualties were on the rise. Indian leaders were preparing to escalate the conflict if necessary and on the other side, Pakistan had threatened to use nuclear weapons to defend its territorial integrity if India initiated war against Pakistan. (Sagan, 2001)

Wieninger (2004), while his discussion on 1999 war states that the Kargil crisis changed the perception of the nuclear deterrence theory and its proponents as it indicated that the nuclear weapons cannot be relied upon for peace.

International community was consciously looking at the developments. It started the process of diplomacy to stop the two states from pursuing the path of war. The United States played a very important role in reducing the tension between the two states. The US President Bill Clinton was in continuous contact with the prime ministers of the two countries.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif visited the United States to get the US support and held a meeting with the US President Bill Clinton. He tried to convince the United States that Pakistan has no soldiers at Kargil and Kashmiri mujahidin are fighting over there for the cause of its liberation. Nawaz Sharif failed to convince Bill Clinton and get the United States support on his view point. The US President Bill Clinton warned Nawaz Sharif that if Pakistan fails to return its forces from Kargil in next 72 hours, it must be ready to face war. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif returned home without getting any of the US support. Pakistan without any international support finally decided to return its forces from Kargil.

The tension between two states started reducing. Both states slowly started returning their forces from the border and the things started coming to normalcy.

Knopf (2002) states that the limited war between India and Pakistan in 1999 after having become declared nuclear powers a year earlier seem to have nuclear optimists alter their claim that nuclear weapons mean no wars between nuclear powers and to say that nuclear armed states will not fight major wars suggesting that they are altering theories to fit the facts.

### **Critical Analysis**

Hoodbhoy and Mian (2002) state that the relationship of India and Pakistan has been deteriorated after their nuclear tests in 1998 and the two states have seen one crisis after another. They state that there is a growing unwillingness among the leaders of South Asia to confront the changed realities, as Einstein famously remarked, "the bomb has changed everything except our way of thinking."

Waltz (1981) addressed the question "do nuclear weapons increase or decrease the chances of war? And reached the conclusion that the nuclear weapons prevent war due to its catastrophic results. In response, Sagan (2001) criticizes Waltz by claiming the failure of nuclear deterrence to avert war between the United States and Soviet Union in cold war era as the two states reached at the edge of the war during Cuban missile crisis and it also fails to avert war between India and Pakistan. Kapur (2005) opposes Hagerty and Ganguly claim that nuclear deterrence has averted war and provided peace to India and Pakistan and states that a significant degree of strategic instability has facilitated Indo-Pakistani violence in contrast to Cold war example where the strategic stability between the United States and Soviet Union allowed lower level violence. He further states, despite Pakistan's extensive military capabilities, it suffers from a significant degree of conventional insecurity vis-à-vis India – a fact of which Pakistani policymakers are keenly aware and that, in their view, makes nuclear deterrence essential to Pakistan's defensive policy.

Pakistan thinks that the nuclear deterrence has averted the chances of any war in the region. But India didn't seem agreed to Pakistan's perception and has prepared itself for strong reaction against any Pakistani adventure. It is difficult to find the controlled wars in today's world. The war has no limits. It can be changed to full-fledged war at any time and lead to a nuclear exchange.

India and Pakistan has a long history of wars with each other as they fought three major wars just in their initial 25 years after independence. They have also fought a limited war at Kargil just one year after getting the nuclear capabilities and have experienced four major crises which almost led them towards a full-fledged war. And the clashes between the forces of the two countries on the line of control are the routine.

Shaikh (2006) argues that Pakistan's 'revisionist' stance on Kashmir as 'the unfinished business of Partition' is a key factor keeping the conflict alive—a conflict that, now it is hedged in by nuclear weapons, has become more rather than less crisis prone. Ganguly (2013) states that after Pakistan's military defeat at the hands of India in 1991 which resulted in the breakup of the country into two parts, Pakistani policy makers, both civilian and military alike decided to go for a nuclear weapons program as it was the only option which could provide a confidence to Pakistan facing conventional military inferiority against India. Ganguly (2013) further states that just weeks before Kargil war, General Musharraf publicly stated *“while the acquisition of nuclear weapons had virtually eliminated the prospects of full-scale war between India and Pakistan, they had also increased the possibility of conventional conflicts.”*

Kargil war fought between the two nuclear powers just one year after the two states have tested their nuclear weapons claimed about 1500 casualties. The crisis occurred due to Pakistan's adventurous policies. Pakistan's perception that India would not go for any conventional war went wrong because India was prepared for a full-fledged war with Pakistan in case the issue was not resolved and Pakistan didn't return its forces from Kargil.

The nuclear deterrence couldn't stop Pakistan to pursue its adventurous policy at Kargil. It also failed to stop India which also had very strong response to Pakistan military's adventure. India was ready to initiate a full-fledged war against Pakistan after the situation worsened between the two states. Both states were not ready to change their positions. The trust deficit and immature attitudes on the two sides have been a cause of concern for the international community. This was the reason that international community rushed to avert a full-fledged war between India and Pakistan.

The proponents of nuclear deterrence claimed its success in the cold war era between the United States and Soviet Union. The success of nuclear deterrence in the cold war era is also debatable because its opponents claim that it failed to maintain peace between the two major powers. The cold war situation was something different from the situation in South Asia. India and Pakistan are immature nuclear states; the leaders in the two countries have always threatened each other with the use of nuclear weapons. The tensions between the two states have not been reduced any more after getting nuclear weapons in comparison to the previous wars. If they fought three wars in initial twenty five years after independence, they have also fought one limited war at Kargil in 1999 and indulged in four other crises which almost led to a full-fledged war between the two countries after getting nuclear capabilities. Therefore, the things have not improved between the two countries to a greater extent. The nuclear deterrence has not become so effective in reducing the tension between the two states as it was thought. The role of international community seemed to be more important one as the diplomacy reduced tensions between the two countries in times of crises.

The United States played a very important role in reducing the tension between the two rival states when the two states were almost at the edge of a full-fledged war. The international community feared that any conventional war between two states can lead to a nuclear exchange. The crisis was averted when Pakistan agreed to return its forces from Kargil. Once Pakistan returned its forces, the situation started improving and with the passage time, the things started coming to normalcy.

The diplomacy again became more successful than nuclear deterrence in reducing the tension between the two states as it did in the previous crises. The democracy had a partial success in averting war in this crisis because Indian democratic government tried to avert full-fledged war between the two countries till the last moment.

## Conclusion

Cheema (2004) states that Kargil conflict was a grim reminder that the open testing and declaration of nuclear weapons in 1998 did not necessarily terminate the potential for a spill-over of conventional hostilities into a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan started its adventurous policies after getting its overt nuclear capabilities and India also seemed prepared to respond strictly to any such situation. The nuclear deterrence seem to have little role in reducing the crisis. Though there was some psychological fear of the nuclear weapons on the both sides but it was not so effective one in reducing the tension between the two states.

The nuclear deterrence only works when the nuclear states are going to give it a weightage and get its definition in the right way. In cases of India and Pakistan, it has not become as effective as there it should be. These two states have their own understanding of the nuclear deterrence theory. Pakistan thinks that the nuclear deterrence has averted any chance of conventional war between the two states as any conventional war between the two states can lead to a nuclear war. It has also found its overt nuclear nuclearization as an opportunity to pursue its adventurous policies against India to get its long standing objectives to alter the regions boundaries. While Indians perceive that the nuclear deterrence has only averted the chances of any nuclear conflict between the two states and its option for conventional war is always open. Pakistan is not ready to accept Indian viewpoint that nuclear deterrence has only averted the chances of any nuclear conflict in the region and thinks

that if its integrity is at stake any time, it will use nuclear weapons. Therefore, it becomes clear from the above mentioned perceptions that if the nuclear deterrence had been so effective, there would have been no crises between these two states.

Chari, Cohen and Cheema, (2007) state that the previous four crises from 1986-87 to 2002 have many global implications. First, South Asia has become a nuclear flash point. Second, the previous crises between the two countries have challenged many existing theories of the field of international relations. Third, both states have their focus to strengthen their defenses as India is in the row of becoming a major world power while Pakistan has all its focus to counter Indian military power. Finally, These crises have given many strategic lessons to the developing states of the world.

The diplomacy became the most successful variable in reducing tension between India and Pakistan in times of Kargil crisis. The democracy also needs to be given partial credit as it also played its role in averting war in Kargil crisis in 1999. Hoodbhoy and Mian (2002) state that there is a greater role for the US to play in South Asia in the future to manage the crises between India and Pakistan as it has done in the past. If the two states don't show maturity then South Asia will have a dark future in the coming days and the nuclear war would be fate for this region.

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