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Nuclear Signaling, Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia

Naeem Salik



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“With more farsighted and better informed governments, more able to communicate with each other openly and honestly, the Cuban missile crisis need never have happened.”

(McGeorge Bundy)

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Abstract

In deterrence theory, besides the capability and political will, the communication of deterrence threat is the third crucial element. However, it has been commonly experienced especially in the context of India-Pakistan hostility that such signals fall on deaf ears. The long festering disputes have created a deep seated mistrust between the two neighbors which leads them to either be dismissive of the signals emanating from the other side, or receive them in an entirely different light in stark contrast to the actual spirit behind these due to perceptual biases and pre-conceived notions about the intentions of the other side. No significant effort seems to have been made by either side to develop their understanding of the concepts of nuclear signaling and de-escalation. An additional difficulty is the lack of a common nuclear jargon which sometimes leads to misinterpretation of messages leading to avoidable crisis situations. These shortcomings need to be seriously addressed by the strategic communities in both India and Pakistan to avoid future crises and to develop mechanisms for de-escalation during crises, or in the event of an actual outbreak of hostilities.

Keywords: Nuclear, Signaling, Escalation, De-escalation, South Asia, India, Pakistan, Crises, Conflict.

Preamble

The importance of clear and candid communication between contending states in the prevention of serious crises from occurring in the first place cannot be overemphasized. Similarly, signaling and communication between the concerned parties is essential in controlling the escalation during a crisis and in its eventual de-escalation. In a nuclearized security environment, the two sides tread very carefully during crises in order to avoid escalation and outbreak of hostilities which could ultimately lead to a nuclear exchange. However, certain conditions have to be met for the nuclear deterrence to be credible and effective in deterring an active conflict. These include a technical capability encompassing both nuclear weapons and requisite delivery systems of adequate reach and payload capacity, political will and effective communication.

Deterrence threat can be communicated in various ways such as public statements, private messages using diplomatic channels, track-two engagements and third parties and demonstrative actions which may take the form of nuclear or missile tests, movement and build-up of forces or heightened alert levels.¹

Even the hotlines between important functionaries of the two nuclear-armed states can also serve a useful purpose. Ideally speaking, the communication should be unambiguous and clear enough for the recipient to understand the message the way it is meant to be understood. Nuclear signaling is employed by states in adversarial relationships using one or more of the above techniques, which constitute various means and methods, used for communication of deterrence threats. Additionally, broader policy actions such as budgetary allocations for building up certain types of forces also serve to signal intent and help in influencing perceptions of the adversary. However, before delving into a more detailed explanation of the means and methods employed to communicate deterrent threats or in other words employment of nuclear signaling during various crises in South Asia with nuclear undertones, it may be pertinent here to discuss the nature of signaling itself and its intricacies.

The Nature of Signaling and its Pitfalls

According to Robert Jervis, "...Signals are like a language in that their meanings are established by agreement, implicit if not explicit."² That is why in interstate interactions whether in peacetime, crises or wars, diplomatic jargon which is universally understood is used for signaling purposes so that the party sending the signal and its intended recipient clearly understand the meanings of the message being conveyed. However, Jervis points out that, it is not always simple and straight forward since signals can be used for

¹ Phil Williams, 'Nuclear Deterrence,' in John Baylis, Ken Booth, John Garnett and Phil Williams eds., *Contemporary Strategy* Volume- I, 1987, Croom Helm, London, PP. 113-139.

² Robert Jervis, 'Signaling and Perception,' in Kirsten Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology*, (Earlbaum, 2002), p. 14.

conveying both the real as well as deceptive images.³ He also argues that disproportionate amount of attention is paid to intentions while the capabilities provide more tangible evidence of resolve. The recipient should especially focus on actions which entail substantial costs to undertake since this kind of behavior is not susceptible to feigning. A pertinent example of such behavior is increase in defense spending by a state intending to demonstrate its determination irrespective of whether it actually translates into enhanced capability.⁴ This point has also been recognized by Thomas Schelling who stated that, “Significant actions usually incur some cost or risk, and carry some evidence of their own credibility.”⁵

The way the signals are usually perceived depends largely on the perceptual dispositions of the recipient. Robert Jervis has opined that, serious events like wars leave behind such long lasting impressions that equally spectacular developments are needed to dispel these.⁶ This strong influence of traumatic events makes decision makers ‘insensitive to incoming information,’⁷ which hampers their ability to identify the differences between the two situations and leads them to draw and apply inappropriate analogies to widely differing conditions.⁸ According to Jervis, there is a direct linkage between the events, lessons learnt from these and the future behavior of the decision makers. It is obvious that the reception and interpretation of incoming signals will be colored by such perceptual dispositions. Although it is not easy to objectively determine how much influence has been exerted by the predispositions on an individual’s perceptions they can certainly become an impediment in the accurate comprehension of signals emanating from the adversary.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵ Thomas Schelling, ‘Arms and Influence,’ New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 150) quoted in Robert Jervis, ‘*Signaling and Perception*,’ p. 17.

⁶ Jervis, p. 218.

⁷ Thomson, ‘Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics,’ Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 36, quoted in Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*.

⁸ Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*, p. 220.

Joseph Nye while cautioning that the new information can sometimes be misleading, or can even be wrongly used makes a somewhat similar argument saying that, “New information affects prior beliefs, but its reception and interpretation are also affected by those prior beliefs...”⁹ The studies by psychologists pertaining to the way people receive and convert the available information into opinions suggest that these opinions are continuously modified in the light of new information. Psychologists argue that our perceptions are subjective in nature and are usually at variance with the objective reality. We, therefore, delude ourselves into seeing what we want to see rather than what exists in reality. Understanding of this psychological phenomenon is important if we want to understand the decisions made by the leaders in different situations because it is not the way the situation exists but the way they perceive it to be, that affects their decision-making.¹⁰

It is evident that the perception of a signal would be deeply affected by the predilections of the recipient and would be subject to his own interpretation. Elaborating the possibility of varied interpretations of a single message Jervis uses the analogy of a sign in a restaurant bathroom saying, “Employees must wash their hands.” He then proceeds to raise the question that should he be reassured by this sign that high standards of hygiene are being maintained, or be worried that the people handling the food have to be reminded to follow the basic requirements of personal hygiene or be concerned that they may view this as an insult and react to it by not washing their hands at all.¹¹ He has also listed what he terms as “motivated biases” amongst the factors that influence the way signals are comprehended and mentions the “aversion to facing psychologically painful value trade-offs,” as one of the most important elements in this regard. Such motivational biases in his view fortify “cognitive inertia.”¹² Another associated problem with ‘motivated biases’ is the illusion of self-righteousness which can lead an actor into believing that its signaling while showing

⁹ Jervis, p. 379.

¹⁰ Robert O. Mathews, et al., ‘*International Conflict and Conflict Management*,’ Prentice Hall Canada Inc., Scarborough, Ontario, 1989, p. 11.

¹¹ Robert Jervis, ‘*Signaling and Perception*,’ p. 10-11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31-2.

resolution is non-threatening without realizing that the same may appear to be hostile and menacing to the perceivers.¹³

In a situation resembling a ‘game of chicken’ wherein both sides are competing to influence each other’s perceptions and where serious conflict or war is the worst possible outcome for the two belligerents, a strong action while running the risk of an unintended clash is also the most certain means of signaling resolve. Paradoxically, in the realm of deterrence theory what may appear to be perilous could very well be safe and converse also holds true.¹⁴ During the Cuban missile crisis the continued and discernible build-up of US forces and preparations for an invasion of Cuba fed into Khrushchev’s fear of an impending invasion of the island. Interestingly, Khrushchev did not have any misgivings about Kennedy’s intentions but he doubted his ability to control the hawks amongst his close aides. Kennedy on his part suspected that Khrushchev had become a hostage to militants in Kremlin.¹⁵ Dean Rusk also recounted later the feeling in the Executive Committee that Khrushchev may be forced into a situation where he would order a ‘full nuclear strike’ due to his ostensible inability to control his Politburo. This misplaced reading of the situation led to a highly embellished assessment of the Soviet resolve.¹⁶

In reality, however, Khrushchev was not only keen to bring the crisis to an end but was also in complete control of the situation in Kremlin. He actually wanted to signal Soviet restraint despite the US naval blockade and was seeking a mutually acceptable outcome of the crisis by sending reconciliatory messages. Khrushchev’s concern about the possibility of Kennedy succumbing to the hawks was also erroneous.¹⁷ It is instructive to note here the effect of deep seated mistrust and prejudices which led to misreading of the situation and misperception of the signals emanating from either side by the other. This factor does play a critical role in South Asia

¹³ Ibid., p. 33-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, “*We All Lost the Cold War,*” Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, p. 306.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 304.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 306.

due to acute trust deficit and deeply embedded suspicions of each other's intentions and can seriously complicate the situation in any future crisis as well. As Richard Ned Lebow has noted that, "...Each [US and Soviet Union] recognized that they shared an overriding interest in the avoidance of nuclear war. In 1962, neither was sure that the other recognized this shared interest. But even this imperative was insufficient to break through the cognitive barrier of mistrust that forty years of ideological division and fifteen years of cold war had erected."¹⁸

During the course of both the Cuban missile crisis, as well as the 1973 Arab-Israeli crisis, Soviet and American leaders attempted to signal their resolve employing threats, heightened military alerts and visibly enhanced military readiness. Kennedy allowed the military preparations to continue as a means of showing resolve, despite the fact that he had already ruled out an invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev on his part warned the Americans of the dangers inherent in reciprocal escalatory actions stating in ominous terms that, "We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knots of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied."¹⁹ Throughout, the Cuban missile crisis the two sides kept the channels of communications open as is evident from the letters exchanged between Khrushchev and Kennedy and series of meetings between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin - the Soviet Ambassador to Washington. These exchanges helped both sides better understand each other's positions, which in turn served to reassure them and made it easier for them to make concessions to achieve a peaceful resolution of the crisis.²⁰

Nuclear Signaling in South Asia

Despite the fact that communication of deterrent threats is a key ingredient of deterrent and different techniques can be employed for nuclear signaling, in South Asia the art of nuclear signaling has not been developed and refined. As a result, the signaling is often crude and the signals are not received by the recipient the way they are

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 310.

¹⁹ Ibid., 302.

²⁰ Lebow, p. 312-13.

intended by the initiator. Interestingly, both Indians and Pakistanis tend to believe, that they know each other well, due to shared history, centuries of co-habitation and understanding of each other's socio-cultural sensibilities, but in reality their understanding of each other is tainted by their perceptual biases and acute trust deficiency which hinders clear reception of signals emanating from the other side.

The confusing and boisterous environment in the midst of a crisis makes it even more difficult to de-clutter nuclear signals from the background noises. To add to this difficulty is the fact that the two countries have been unable to develop a common nuclear jargon, which leads to misunderstandings and misperceptions. The following paragraphs will provide a brief overview of actual or supposed instances of nuclear signaling during various India-Pakistan crises starting with the 1986-87 Brasstacks crisis to the "Pulwama Crisis" of February-April 2019.

Alleged Nuclear Signaling in the Brasstacks Crisis of 1986/87

According to a respected Indian analyst P.R. Chari, one of the earliest and often cited incident of nuclear signaling allegedly happened in early 1987 during a major Indian military exercise code named 'Brasstacks.' The episode was based on an interview by a prominent Pakistani scientist AQ Khan with a well-known Indian journalist Kuldip Nayyar, in which he apparently claimed that Pakistan had achieved nuclear weapons capability and boasted about mastering the enrichment technology. Though the interview was ultimately published on March 1, 1987 by London's Observer Newspaper, by which time the military crisis had already abated, its characterization as a nuclear threat and its role as a catalyst in the de-escalation of the crisis remains to be a contentious issue.

There are several interpretations of the circumstances of the interview which took place on 28th of January 1987 and its contents. AQ Khan himself later claimed that he had been quoted out of context, nevertheless, the Pakistani journalist who had facilitated the interview lost his job and AQ Khan reportedly received a dressing

down by President Zia himself.²¹ Late P.R. Chari while lamenting the lack of understanding of each other's nuclear doctrines and operational precepts amongst India and Pakistan argued that, "the uncertainty in the manner of sending, receiving and perceiving nuclear signals between the parties" is a complicating factor. Referring to the alleged nuclear threat by AQ Khan he points out, "that it remains a controversial event in the annals of the conflictual Indian-Pakistani relationship and demonstrates why nuclear signaling deserves far more attention in bilateral dialogue than it has received to date."²²

Chari contends that undoubtedly India instantly learnt of the threat by AQ Khan, however, the nuclear signal was ignored in New Delhi. Indian leadership including the Indian Army Chief General Sundarji was dismissive of Pakistani nuclear capability. This was a classic case of perceptual biases affecting the judgement of India's civilian, as well as military leadership. In Chari's view, the lack of credence given by India to Pakistan's nuclear capability prompted President Zia to reinforce the nuclear threat more openly in an interview with Time magazine on March 30, 1987. Zia declared that, "Pakistan has the capability to build the Bomb whenever it wishes." Qualifying his statement by adding that, "Pakistan had no intention of manufacturing nuclear weapons and that he was only speaking about technological possibilities."²³ Alluding to the US-Soviet experience Chari states that, "signaling between new nuclear powers is most fraught at the start of their mutual deterrence interactions," and cautions that, "after 1998 nuclear tests by both India and Pakistan, there is no illusion about their nuclear capabilities. A nuclear signal now would convey a threat that is seriously destabilizing."²⁴

²¹ Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, quoted in P.R. Chari, 'Nuclear Signaling in South Asia: Revisiting A.Q. Khan's 1987 Threat,' in *Proliferation Analysis*, November 14, 2013, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/14/nuclear-signaling-in-south-asia-revisiting-a-q-khan-s-1987-threat/gqky>

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The AQ Khan interview does not fit easily into the recognized means of communication of nuclear deterrent threat identified by Phil Williams. Since, the interview was given by an individual in his personal capacity ostensibly without official sanction it cannot be categorized as a public statement. It was also not delivered directly through a diplomatic channel nor could the messenger be termed as ‘third party’ because he belonged to one of the belligerents. It is also questionable whether it had any impact on the decision making by the intended recipient. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the ‘capability’ being articulated was anywhere near an operationally usable capability given the fact that President Musharraf has acknowledged in his memoirs that the nuclear capability was not fully operational even during the Kargil crisis.²⁵

Nuclear Signaling in the 1990 Crisis?

In early 1990, tensions were running high between India and Pakistan consequent to the breaking out of an insurgency in the Indian Occupied Kashmir. The unrest amongst the local Kashmiris was caused by large scale rigging of the elections held in 1987 resulting in a virtual boycott of 1989 elections.²⁶ As a result Governor’s rule was imposed in Jammu and Kashmir by the New Delhi government. The harsh measures adopted by the governor to suppress the revolt resulted in large scale casualties transforming the protest into a mass movement. The Indians blamed Pakistan for exploiting the Kashmiri’s grievances to serve its own political objectives. As Howard Schaffer has stated that, “In Srinagar and other Valley cities and towns, thousands marched in defiance of curfews and police cordons to demand azadi – literally independence – for Kashmir...”²⁷ It would be way beyond the capacity of Pakistan or any other outside power to bring such large numbers of civilians to streets in the face of bullets and other instruments of suppression being used by the security forces.

²⁵ Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire – a Memoir*, Free Press, New York, 2006, p. 97-8.

²⁶ Altaf Hussain, ‘Kashmir’s Flawed Elections,’ *BBC News*, September 14, 2002. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2223364.stm

²⁷ Howard Schaffer, *The Limits of Influence: America’s Role in Kashmir*, quoted in Michael Krepon, Nate Cohn eds., ‘Crises in South Asia: Trends and Potential Consequences,’ Stimson Center, Washington, DC, 2011, p. 37.

Towards the end of January 1990, Pakistani Foreign Minister Sahibzada Yaqub Khan visited New Delhi, ostensibly to deliver a tough message to the Indian leadership and according to some experts may well have threatened a nuclear war.²⁸ The Indian government appointed Kargil Committee in its report on the causes and consequences of the Kargil Crisis published a decade after the 1990 crisis has also speculated that Sahibzada Yaqub Khan called the attention of his Indian interlocutors to the serious situation in the Kashmir Valley and suggested that the situation could spiral out of control.²⁹ The committee inferred that from the tone of his message Indian Prime Minister V.P. Singh and Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral would have taken it as a threat. Such speculation readily accepted without scrutiny has caused avoidable misperceptions yet these have been bandied about since these helped in the promotion of a particular narrative. As far as Sahibzada Yaqub Khan is concerned he was known to be very careful with his choice of words and could not have been expected to make any loose statements. Sahibzada Yaqub himself firmly denied having delivered any threat to Indian leaders especially one with nuclear undertones.³⁰ The contention that on his return from Delhi, Yaqub Khan gave a nationally televised address in which he explained Pakistan's Kashmir policy in aggressive terms³¹ is again totally fallacious since there is no tradition in Pakistan wherein the Foreign Minister of the country makes a nationally televised address, this privilege is only available to the President and Prime Minister of the country. There is also no record of such an address with Pakistan Television.³²

²⁸ Chari et al., *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, quoted in Michael Krepon and Nate Cohn eds., *Crises in South Asia*, p. 37.

²⁹ K. Subrahmanyam, K. K. Hazari, B. G. Verghese and Satish Chandra, *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 65.

³⁰ Author's conversation with Sahibzada Yaqub Khan in Islamabad in 2005, wherein he categorically denied having given any nuclear threat to Indian leadership and expressed his willingness to go public on this.

³¹ Chari et al., *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, p. 90-1, quoted in Michael Krepon and Nate Cohn eds., 'Crises in South Asia: Trends and Potential Consequences.' Henry L. Stimson Center, September 2011, p. 38.

³² On author's inquiry the concerned officials from the Current Affairs Department of the state television PTV confirmed that there is no record of any such interview in their archives.

The United States, apparently alarmed by the possible nuclear dimension to the crisis used its diplomatic capital pro-actively through its diplomats and military attaches based in New Delhi and Islamabad and then sent a delegation led by the CIA Deputy Director, Robert Gates to the two capitals. According to P. R. Chari the crisis had already peaked by the time Gates arrived in the region. However, his mission nevertheless contributed positively in mitigating the crisis since both India and Pakistan took practical steps to lower the tensions in the wake of Gates' visit.³³

The 1999 Kargil Crisis and Nuclear Signaling

In April 1999 India tested its medium range missile AGNI-2 which was followed shortly thereafter by Pakistani flight tests of Ghauri on 14 April 1999 and Shaheen-1 ballistic missile on 15th of April 1999.³⁴ These tests were seen as Pakistani response to the Indian test. Thereafter, Pakistan made a deliberate decision to avoid tit-for-tat testing and conduct missile tests only to meet the technological imperatives of validating technical parameters.³⁵ Consequently, there is no euphoria built around the missile tests especially since the signing of the 'Agreement on Pre-notification of Missile Tests' between India and Pakistan. However, while the missile tests may be viewed as a routine technical affair in normal times, these tests have different connotations during crises, particularly when employed for nuclear signaling. In South Asia there have been instances where missile tests were used during crises to signal resolve and/or demonstrate technical capabilities.

Some writers such as Indian journalist Raj Chengappa have claimed that India had readied no less than half a dozen nuclear

³³ P. R. Chari, *Nuclear Crisis, Escalation Control and Deterrence in South Asia*, August 2003, The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC., P. 17.

³⁴ For chronology of Indian and Pakistani Missile Tests see, Naeem Ahmad Salik, *Missile Issues in South Asia, The Nonproliferation Review/Summer 2002*. Also see Brigadier Naeem Ahmad Salik, *Pakistan's Ballistic Missile Development Programme – Security Imperatives, Rationale and Objectives, Strategic Studies*, Spring 2001, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

³⁵ Author's personal knowledge of the event and the policy decision that followed.

weapons during the Kargil conflict.³⁶ On the other hand, Bruce Reidel, a former CIA officer who was working on President Clinton's staff at the time of the Kargil conflict has claimed that they had evidence of Pakistani preparations for nuclear war that was shared with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his one-on-one meeting with President Clinton. These preparations he asserts were being carried out by Pakistani military without the knowledge of the Pakistani Prime Minister.³⁷ However, [these claims have been denied by the Indian officials] make more clear?,³⁸ and President Musharraf confirmed that Pakistani nuclear capability was not operational in 1999 and dismissed any talk of preparations for nuclear strikes as 'preposterous.'³⁹ Senior officials in Pakistani nuclear establishment termed such speculations as 'ridiculous.'⁴⁰ Ironically, the most widely quoted nuclear signal from Pakistan during the Kargil crisis came from Pakistan's Minister for Religious Affairs, Raja Zafar-ul-Haq,⁴¹ who could hardly distinguish a nuclear bomb from a conventional bomb and was totally oblivious of the implications of any use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Signaling in 2001-02 Military Stand-off

While the crisis following the attack on Indian Parliament was beginning to unfold, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandez, during an interview with the Hindustan Times on December 30, 2001, sent out the first nuclear signal by India stating that, "We could take a strike, survive, and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished."⁴² In fact, a few days earlier he had already announced that Indian missiles are in position referring to the forward movement of

³⁶ Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace*, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 2000, p.437.

³⁷ Bruce Reidel, 'American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House,' p.12-13, http://www.sas.upenn.edu/casi/publications/Reidel_2002.

³⁸ W.P.S. Sidhu, 'Regional Dynamics and Deterrence: South Asia (1), in Ian R. Kenyon and John Simpson eds., *Deterrence and New Global Security Environment*, Taylor and Francis Limited, 2006, see note 28, p. 167.

³⁹ Pervez Musharraf, 'In the Line of Fire,' Free Press, New York, 2006, p. 97-8.

⁴⁰ Naeem Salik, *Genesis of South Asian Nuclear Deterrence*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 247. Also see note 16 p. 256.

⁴¹ Anoj Panday, "The Stability-Instability Paradox: The case of the Kargil War," Penn state *Journal of International Affairs* (Fall 2011): 9.

⁴² T. Jyaraman, 'Nuclear Crisis in South Asia,' *Frontline*, Volume 19 – Issue 12, June 8-21, 2002.

nuclear capable close to India's border with Pakistan. The authority to deploy and launch the missiles was also delegated to the Indian Army Chief.⁴³ On January 3, 2002, in the midst of the mobilization of Indian land forces towards the international border, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee speaking in Lucknow pronounced that, "...no weapon would be spared in self-defense. Whatever weapon was available it would be used no matter how it wounded the enemy."⁴⁴ This was undoubtedly an unmistakable nuclear signal emanating from a 'public statement made by the Indian Prime Minister in an already tension ridden environment.

To join the chorus the Indian Army Chief General Padmanabhan declared that, "if anyone is mad enough to use nuclear weapons against India, the perpetrator shall be punished so severely that his continuation in any form would be doubtful," adding that, "We are ready for a second strike. Let me reassure you that India has sufficient nuclear weapons."⁴⁵ The statement by the Indian Army Chief appeared to be aimed at deterring Pakistan from contemplating any nuclear use by threatening 'massive retaliation' or it could well be to signal to Pakistan that India does not give much credence to Pakistan's nuclear capability. To further reinforce the threats on 25th January 2002 India conducted a test of Agni-1A, a short-range missile with a range of 700 kilometres that was unambiguously a Pakistan specific missile. Commenting on the missile test Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee explained that, "For the nation's security and protection we are taking several steps and Agni is one among them."⁴⁶

These Indian statements and actions present a picture quite contrary to conventional wisdom that in any crisis situation between

⁴³ Fernandez, 'India's Missiles in Position,' *The Times of India*, 26 December 2001 and 'Brahmastra as last resort,' Army Chief to Clear Prithvi deployment, *The Pioneer*, 31 January 2002, <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MISSILES/News/2002/02-Jan>

⁴⁴ *The Hindu*, January 4, 2002, quoted in T.Jayaraman, 'Nuclear crisis in South Asia,' *Frontline*, Volume 19 – Issue 12, June 8-21, 2002.

⁴⁵ Rahul Bedi, 'India gives Musharraf nuclear warning,' *The Telegraph*, UK, 21 June 2019.

⁴⁶ Alex Wagner, 'India Tests Short Range Agni Ballistic Missile,' *Arms Control Today*, March 2002. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_03/agnimarch02

India and Pakistan, the latter exhibits a tendency to brandish its nuclear weapons ostensibly due to its weakness in conventional forces vis-à-vis India. It is interesting to note that Indian civilian as well as military leadership had started nuclear signaling through public statements as well as demonstrative actions right at the outset of the crisis while their conventional forces were still in the process of mobilization. Till that time, Pakistan had neither hurled any nuclear threat at India nor demonstrated its intent through any missile test or upgrading the state of operational readiness of its strategic forces. It was not until April 2002 that the first nuclear signal emanated from Pakistan when President Musharraf in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, alluded to the possibility of Pakistan's use of the atom bomb "as a last resort."⁴⁷

Then, in the last week of May 2002, when the outbreak of hostilities looked imminent, Pakistan conducted a series of missile tests to signal its resolve and to augment its deterrence threat. These missile tests were used for nuclear signaling through what can be termed as 'demonstrative actions.' However, it is hard to say whether the message was perceived by the Indians in the way it was intended by Pakistan. Apparently, either India did not receive the Pakistani signal in its right perspective or deliberately adopted a dismissive attitude. Going by the statement made by Nirupama Rao, the spokeswoman of India's Ministry of External Affairs, wherein, she claimed that, "India is not impressed with missile antics by Pakistan,"⁴⁸ India appeared to have intentionally played down the significance of these tests in order to convey its indifference to the Pakistani nuclear deterrence.

It is also not possible to say with any certainty whether in response to Rao's statement or just to drive home the point, President Pervez Musharraf in a June 17, 2002 pronouncement tried to reiterate the deterrence message saying that, "We were compelled

⁴⁷ Roy McCarthy and John Hooper, 'Musharraf ready to use nuclear arms,'

⁴⁸ Nirupama Rao, quoted in Feroz Hassan Khan, 'Nuclear Signaling, Missiles and Escalation Control in South Asia,' in Michael Krepon, Rodney W. Jones and Ziad Haider eds., *Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia*, November 10, 2004. www.stimson.org/books-reports/escalation-control-and-the-nuclear-option-in-south-asia/

to show then in May 1998 that we were not bluffing and in May 2002 we were compelled to show that we do not bluff.”⁴⁹In early June 2002 Indian Defense Secretary Yogendra Narain commented in an interview to an Indian weekly magazine ‘Outlook’ stated that, India would retaliate with nuclear weapons in case of Pakistan’s use of nuclear weapons and ominously declared that both countries should be prepared for “mutual destruction.”⁵⁰ The Indian Ministry of Defense however, quickly moved to distance itself from the statement.

There was yet another series of missile tests by Pakistan in October 2002, but by then the military stand-off was already waning. It would be difficult to definitively characterize this particular series of missile tests as yet another signal meant to persuade India to back down, or whether these were routine tests carried out due to technological imperatives.

An American analyst contends that besides signaling resolve, missile tests may also be used to invoke diplomatic intervention by a third party.⁵¹ However, in particular case there is no clear evidence to suggest that missile tests acted as a catalyst for an intercession by a third party. With the ambiguity surrounding the effectiveness of missile tests as a means of signaling deterrence threats in crises between India and Pakistan, questions can be raised with regard to the utility of missile tests as tools for nuclear signaling in any future crisis given the high cost of this venture besides the risks involved. Though, in South Asia the risks are mitigated to a large extent due to the practice of prior warning of impending missile tests to each other and the caution exercised by both countries not to test fire missiles in each other’s direction. Despite the fact that in 2001-02 the missile tests pre-notification agreement had not been formally signed by the two states, both India and Pakistan took care to pre-notify their intended tests to the other side in order to avoid any misunderstandings. Simultaneously, it served the purpose of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ‘Indian Official says attack plan ready: Defense Ministry plays down report,’ *Dawn*, June 4, 2002. Available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/40179/indian-official-says-attack-plan-ready-defence-ministry-plays-down-report>

⁵¹ Feroz Khan, *Nuclear Signaling*, 75.

signaling/communication as well. This procedure has since been formalized as part of the Ballistic Missile Tests Pre-notification agreement between India and Pakistan signed in October 2005.⁵²

Mumbai 2008 and Uri 2016

During the course of the crisis resulting from a terrorist attack on Mumbai there was no apparent nuclear signaling by either side. India which had adopted the Cold Start Doctrine in 2004 and had carried out at least seven corps level exercises to practice the concept did not even threaten to operationalize the doctrine and only talked of surgical strikes against the so called terrorist training camps inside Pakistan. However, even this threat did not materialize because of its serious escalation potential. A few days after the attack on an Indian military camp at Uri in Indian occupied part of Kashmir in September, 2016, the Indian army claimed to have carried out a cross LOC ‘surgical strike.’⁵³

Pakistan categorically denied that any such operation had taken place. Although such a small scale operation even if it happened has very little potential to escalate directly to a nuclear conflict, it set a dangerous precedent wherein India was encouraged by absence of international opprobrium and even tacit approval of its claimed provocative action.

The international community didn’t even caution India that it is going down a dangerous path which led to India’s bellicose behavior during the crisis following the suicide attack on Indian Central Reserve Police Bus by a Kashmiri youth near Pulwama in the Indian held Kashmir. Pakistan’s denial of the occurrence of any cross LOC operation in September 2016 was interpreted by the Indians as well as the outside observers as a result of either its inability or its

⁵² Erin Creegan, ‘India, Pakistan Sign Missile Notification Pact,’ *Arms Control Today*, November 2005. Available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005_11/NOV-IndiaPak

⁵³ India is over publicizing ‘surgical strikes’, says former Home Minister, *Pakistan Today*, 04 October 2016. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/10/04/india-is-over-publicising-surgical-strikes-says-former-home-minister/>

unwillingness to respond in kind. Had Pakistan reacted appropriately to India's claimed action irrespective of whether it actually happened or not, India would have thought many times before venturing in to another potentially dangerous action in February 2019. One noteworthy aspect of Mumbai and Uri crises was that ground forces were not mobilized and therefore potential for an immediate escalation to a large scale conventional conflict was lacking.

Nuclear Signaling and the Pulwama Crisis 2019

On 14 February 14, 2019, a convoy of vehicle carrying personnel of India's paramilitary Central Police Reserve Force (CRPF) was attacked near Pulwama by a teenaged local Kashmiri suicide bomber, causing over 40 fatalities. Indian authorities blamed Pakistan based proscribed extremist group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) for planning and executing the attack on the basis of a video message by the suicide attacker in which he had purportedly avowed allegiance to JeM and the JeM's claim of responsibility for the attack. The incident happened in the backdrop of India's ongoing election campaign and was therefore, exploited for domestic political gains. The Indian media was also up in arms and drummed up war hysteria. Pakistani Prime Minister offered to cooperate in the investigation of the incident with India and asked for sharing of actionable intelligence. Given the threatening statements emanating from India he also made it clear that in case India takes any military action Pakistan would definitely respond in kind. He also cautioned about the dangers of a conflict between two nuclear-armed states.

In the midst of this tension filled atmosphere the Indian Air force carried out an attack on an alleged terrorist training camp near the town of Balakot in the Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa province of Pakistan at 3 o'clock in the morning of 26 February 2019 and made incredible claims about the success of this operation including the claim to have killed over 300 so called terrorists. Pakistan's military spokesman announced that Pakistan would respond to the Indian attack at a time and place of its own choosing. On 27th of February 2019, Pakistan Air Force launched a daytime attack at several targets in Indian occupied Kashmir. The Indian interceptors

followed Pakistani aircraft into Pakistan airspace and during the ensuing aerial engagement an Indian Mig-21 was shot down. The debris of the aircraft along with its pilot who had bailed out fell on the Pakistani side of the LOC. The PAF claimed to have shot down a second Indian aircraft which supposedly fell on the Indian side. After these engagements there was no further escalation and the tensions gradually tapered off because of the realization of the serious risks involved in further escalation as well as behind the scenes prodding by friendly countries.

In terms of nuclear signaling during the crisis it was more of posturing rather than any practical change in nuclear postures or readiness levels understandably mainly by the Indian leadership given the prevailing election fever in India. Indian Prime Minister Modi stated while addressing an election rally on 18 April 2019 that, we have called “Pakistan’s nuclear bluff” because India has the “Mother of Nuclear Bombs.”⁵⁴ He was certainly flaunting India’s ‘thermonuclear bombs.’

Then addressing another public rally on 21 April, 2019 he pronounced that, we are not scared of Islamabad’s threats adding that India’s nuclear capabilities were not meant for use on ‘Diwali.’⁵⁵ He was referring to Hindu festival of lights and fireworks. This kind of nuclear sabre rattling by none other than the Indian Prime Minister himself was unprecedented to say the least. Earlier on 17 March 2019, the Indian Navy in a press release announced that, “The Major combat units of the Navy, including the Carrier Battle Group with INS Vikramaditya, nuclear submarines and scores of other ships, submarines and aircraft swiftly transited from exercise to operational deployment mode as tensions between India and Pakistan escalated.”⁵⁶ Though the precautionary operational movement and deployment of naval units during a serious crisis should not come as a surprise but the special mention

⁵⁴ PM Modi Says He Called Pakistan’s Nuclear Bluff Because India Has the ‘Mother of Bombs,’ *PTI*, April 18, 2019.

⁵⁵ ‘Our Nuclear Weapons are not for Diwali,’ Modi Threatens Pakistan, *The Express Tribune*, 10 June 2019.

⁵⁶ ‘Balakot Air strikes: When key naval assets were put on alert,’ *The Hindu*, March 17, 2019.

of the ‘nuclear submarines’ in the press release was undoubtedly in the realm of nuclear signaling.

On Pakistan’s part there was apparently no attempt at nuclear signaling except references by Pakistani Prime Minister in his three short speeches during the crisis to the dangers of a military confrontation between two nuclear armed states. After the tit-for-tat air actions a meeting of the National Command Authority (NCA) was convened and in a departure from its two decades old tradition of issuing press statements on the conclusion of such meetings no press release was issued to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the NCA’s statement. However, Pakistan’s military spokesperson in his exuberance while announcing the convening of the NCA meeting added, “I hope you know what NCA means and what it does.”⁵⁷ These uncalled for remarks could be interpreted as an oblique nuclear signal, which was against the spirit of the decision to refrain from making a press statement at the conclusion of the NCA meeting held on 27 February 2019

Escalation and De-escalation

The strategic literature is replete with terms such as escalation control, escalation dominance and de-escalation etc. However, the concept of de-escalation is not very well understood mainly due to its various connotations and interpretations. Its applications range from calming down an agitated individual to crises and conflicts between states or groups of states. There is no precise definition of the concept itself. De-escalation is a multidimensional and broad based phenomenon that can encompass actions aimed at reduction in the scale of a conflict to those intended to find a settlement of the dispute and may include both implicit bargaining and inherent understanding of mutual benefits.⁵⁸ Negotiations stretched over a prolonged period without yielding any results may not constitute de-escalation, while the beginning of a negotiations process amongst

⁵⁷ Mehmal Sarfraz, ‘India has “committed uncalled for aggression,” says Pakistan’s top security committee, The Hindu, February 26, 2019.

⁵⁸ Louis Kriesberg and Stuart J. Thorson eds., ‘*Timing the De-escalation of International Conflicts*,’ Syracuse University Press, 1991, p. 3.

antagonists who were resistant to talking to each other is considered to be de-escalation.⁵⁹

A serious impediment to de-escalation is the fact that longstanding conflicts become so deeply entrenched that vested interests are developed for their perpetuation. The primary disputes are also lost sight of as they get entangled in the web of internal dynamics and mutual suspicions of the concerned parties. In South Asia the deep seated antagonism between India and Pakistan has led to demonization of each other and has caused an acute mistrust amongst them. As a result there is a general tendency to suspect each other's motives even when a serious and sincere effort is made to de-escalate the tensions. Consequently, the negotiations continue with nothing to show by way of resolution of even minor disputes. The two sides agree on some confidence building and conflict avoidance measures until another untoward incident occurs to derail the negotiations for some years. The mere resumption of the dialogue then starts appearing as an achievement by itself though it does bring down the level of tensions and can, therefore, be considered a de-escalation measure.

De-escalation is likely to be more vigorously pursued in the event of a sudden escalation of a conflict or outbreak of hostilities. World bodies such as the United Nations and major powers are also more likely to intercede in such situations.⁶⁰ In cases where the dominant characteristic of relations between the two rivals is mutual hostility a third party mediation and nudging may be useful in bringing them to the negotiating table. The stature and background of the negotiators is also critical for the outcome. There is a qualitative difference between negotiations led by high-level political leadership and those conducted by government officials who are constrained by their briefs and can't take major initiatives at their own without authorization by their respective governments. De-escalation according to some experts is a stage in the course of a conflict and in turn consists of several stages which include, "signaling or probing by one party, exploratory discussions about

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

possible agendas for negotiations, conducting negotiations and concluding and sustaining agreements.”⁶¹

In South Asia there have been several instances of de-escalation of conflicts and serious crises in the past. The 1948 conflict over Kashmir was brought to an end by the UNSC. The cessation of hostilities during the 1965 war was again accomplished through the UNSC. The 1986-87 Brasstacks crisis was de-escalated through a negotiated agreement between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan leading to a phased withdrawal of the two forces to their respective peacetime locations. The crisis in 1990 required a trip by Robert Gates for it to be defused while the 1999 Kargil conflict was de-escalated through personal intervention by President Clinton. The 2001-02 military stand-off witnessed a flurry of diplomatic activity involving high level visits by senior American and British officials to the two capitals while the two countries had closed almost all direct communications channels between them. The 2008 Mumbai crisis though comparatively short lived as compared to the 2001-02 crisis also witnessed US intercession at very high levels. As a consequence however, the composite dialogue process aimed at finding negotiated resolution of bilateral disputes between India and Pakistan has been stalled and all efforts at restoring it to pre-2008 level have so far failed to make much headway. Of late tensions have been building up between the two countries but no serious de-escalation effort seems to be in sight. Should this situation lead the two countries to reframe the narrative of their conflict and to a serious review of the post-Simla policy of bilateralism, which has failed to break the gridlock so far and consider giving a chance to outside powers or the United Nations to mediate or facilitate the resolution of their long outstanding disputes.

De-escalation has also been used variously to denote ‘war termination’ or even ‘war- deterrence’ depending on the context in which it was employed. An example of employment of the concept of de-escalation in terms which would normally characterize deterrence can be found in the Russian Military Doctrine pronounced in 2000.⁶² The doctrine itself has its origins in the

⁶¹ Kriesberg and Thorson, op. cit. p. 4.

⁶² Nikolai N. Sukov, ‘*Why Russia calls a limited nuclear strike “de-escalation”*’.

experience of the operation ‘Desert Storm’ and the Kosovo war where precision guided munitions were used by the US and its NATO allies on a large scale. Conscious of the fact that in any future conflict with the West the Russian forces would be unable to withstand the growing power of the advanced conventional munitions of their adversaries the Russians introduced the notion of de-escalation.⁶³

The strategy envisages the use of threat of a ‘limited nuclear strike’ to compel the adversary to back down. It also visualizes that such a threat would deter the United States and its allies from intervening in a conflict in which Russia has high stakes. The existence of this doctrine may well have caused the US and its Western allies to stay away from the war in Georgia in 2008 or the on-going crisis in Ukraine.⁶⁴ This concept of de-escalation is based on a modified notion of the scale of use of nuclear weapons to cause what has been described as “tailored damage” aimed at upsetting the cost-gain equation of the enemy. Such a threat of limited nuclear use is based on the assumption that the stakes of the two parties involved in a particular conflict are unequal. It has also enhanced the salience of nuclear weapons in Russian security policy. The concept was further refined in the 2010 doctrine wherein the use of nuclear weapons was made conditional to conflicts involving another nuclear state and to contingencies where Russia’s very existence is at stake.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Neither India nor Pakistan have declared their nuclear alert levels and therefore heightened alert levels during crises even if publicly pronounced would not clearly signal the actual enhancement in alert status of strategic forces. There is also little possibility of the two countries elaborating their respective alert

⁶³ Mark B. Schneider, *Escalate to De-escalate, Proceedings*, Vol. 143/ 2/1368, February 2017, US Naval Institute. Available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017/february/escalate-de-escalate>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

levels and what all actions each of these levels will constitute. This would leave public statements by senior government officials and the employment of bilateral or third party diplomatic channels as the available options for signaling.

Public statements are also beset with problems of their own and can cause misunderstandings or misperceptions, especially in view of the absence of mutually agreed and commonly recognized strategic jargon. Moreover, in South Asia it has often been experienced that totally unconcerned officials who are neither privy to nor have even the very basic understanding of strategic issues make statements out of exuberance thereby causing unnecessary confusion. The statement by Pakistani Minister of Religious Affairs during the Kargil crisis is a case in point.

The communication of deterrence messages would best be done at the political level. For this purpose, bilateral diplomatic channels and existing hotlines between key officials on either side could be used as means of communicating nuclear signals with the greatest clarity. In this regard, hotlines between the respective foreign secretaries and the DGMOs would be a dependable means of signaling resolve and understanding each other's vital interests. The two sides could also notify their respective points of contact, who could exchange necessary information with their counterparts on behalf of their political leaderships. Though, due to disparity in the two nuclear command and control systems it would not be easy to find corresponding counterparts. For instance, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCSC) and Director General Strategic Plans Division – the two key officials on the Pakistani side don't have equivalent counterparts on the Indian side.

Pakistan's current nuclear posture bears some similarities with the Russian concept wherein it has introduced battlefield nuclear weapons for manipulation of threat and option enhancement in order to deter a conventional conflict of even a limited scale in a situation of unfavorable conventional balance. However, Pakistan has, unlike the Russians, dubbed its doctrine as 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' rather than calling it 'de-escalation strategy.' India, though, appears non-receptive or dismissive of these signals and is continuously

challenging this strategy by raising the stakes through aggressive actions across the LOC as well as the Working Boundary. India is continuing to seek a space for a conventional conflict under the nuclear overhang despite lowering of the nuclear threshold by Pakistan. It appears that the nuclear signaling in South Asia is not finding receptive ears and most signals are not being perceived by the receivers in the way they are intended by the sender leading to a very tenuous situation which should not be allowed to persist due to its inherent dangers. There is, therefore, an urgent need for both countries to fine tune their nuclear signaling, develop a common strategic language and remove the filters of bias and mistrust while receiving signals by the other side.



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