Chapter 12

Deterrence (In)stability Between India and Pakistan

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Abstract Since the introduction of India's cold start and Pakistan's full spectrum deterrence doctrines, the subcontinental deterrence landscape has been characterised by strong cross-domain dynamics. In extremis, if both states adhere to the threats issued in their doctrines a Pakistan-supported militant attack on Indian soil could escalate into an all-out nuclear exchange. It is a development that has been met with great concern by many analysts for its detrimental impact on deterrence stability. Since the doctrines are believed to have become operational, at least four incidents occurred which could have sparked this cross-domain escalation spiral. And yet, crisis behaviour proved vastly different from what doctrine predicted. What does this say about deterrence stability on the subcontinent? This chapter assesses deterrence stability on the basis of perfect deterrence theory, which is argued to provide a more nuanced view of deterrence relationships than classical deterrence theory. It finds support for the stability-instability paradox and argues that deterrence is less unstable than appears at first sight. Furthermore, to fully appreciate the degree of deterrence stability, it is suggested that the factors 'context' and 'narrative' should be included into the equation.

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12.1 Introduction

Since their inception, India and Pakistan have been at odds over Jammu and Kashmir, the Himalayan region where both countries' religious and territorial rivalry melt together into a highly flammable cocktail. In their 70-year history both countries have waged four wars (1947, 1965, 1971, 1999), experienced numerous border skirmishes, several military standoffs, and continue to exchange artillery fire across the Line of Control (LoC) regularly. Having been defeated in these wars and having lost Eastern Pakistan in one of them, Pakistan arrived at the conclusion that it could not match India with conventional means. It therefore turned to an asymmetric strategy to “bleed India through a thousand cuts” by supporting anti-Indian militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Operating from behind a veil of plausible deniability, Pakistan has been using Kashmiri insurgent groups as a strategic extension of its own security forces. Since both countries' overt nuclear proliferation in 1998, India faced the daunting challenge of formulating an effective counterterrorism strategy while remaining under Pakistan's nuclear threshold. Frustrated over its inability to deter Pakistan from supporting militant groups inside India, New Delhi devised its assertive *cold start doctrine* which entails limited advances inside Pakistan by rapidly mobilising infantry and armour before Pakistan's defensive positions can be occupied. Cold start may be initiated following insurgent attacks on Indian territory that are believed to be supported by Pakistan.¹

Even though the feasibility or even the existence of the doctrine remains hotly debated, cold start has taken root in and beyond Pakistan.² Pakistani strategic planners believe that the doctrine has been in effect since approximately 2013.³ In response, Pakistan introduced its *full spectrum deterrence* (FSD) doctrine with the purpose of plugging the gap exploited by cold start. The idea behind FSD is to

¹Shukla 2017.

²See Gady 2019; Ladwig 2007. Cold start is controversial in several ways; partly because of its modalities, but also because some analysts argue that India is presently unable to mount a cold start-like intervention. It is not the purpose of this chapter to delve into the question whether cold start is real or not. This chapter explores the impact of the contemporary deterrence landscape on deterrence stability. A key feature of deterrence is that the reality of a threat is in the eye of the beholder. The fact that Pakistan introduced full spectrum doctrine and tactical nuclear weapons shortly after cold start was believed to have become operational, suggests that it perceives the threat as ‘real enough’ to respond to it accordingly.

³Karl 2015.

provide Pakistan with retaliatory options that are commensurate with the intensity of the aggression it faces by linking conventional means with nuclear options on all levels—from tactical to strategic. A key component of FSD is the introduction of a tactical nuclear weapon (TNW), the Hatf IX ‘Nasr’ short range ballistic missile with a yield of 0.5 to 5 kilotons. The main purpose of Nasr appears to deter Indian conventional incursions into Pakistani territory as envisaged under cold start.

As a result, the subcontinental deterrence landscape has been characterised by strong cross-domain dynamics. Considering that Pakistan keeps open the option of a nuclear first-use and India adheres to a doctrine of massive retaliation, a Pakistan-supported militant attack on Indian soil could *in extremis* devolve into an all-out nuclear exchange, if both states choose to stick to the threats issued in their doctrines. This development has been met with alarmism by various scholars and analysts, calling the situation on the subcontinent highly unstable.⁴ Despite this worrying development, India and Pakistan have experienced several crises which consisted of ingredients that could have sparked the cross-domain escalation spiral. Yet, in recent crises both states decided to react differently. This chapter looks into Indo-Pak crisis behaviour since 2015 to explore why India and Pakistan did not stick to their ‘promised’ threats and assesses what this means for deterrence stability. The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, the concept of deterrence stability is explained. After that, the course of events surrounding the militant assaults in Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Uri and Pulwama are discussed, followed by an assessment of Indo-Pak deterrence stability in the present situation.

12.2 On Deterrence Stability

To understand the concept of deterrence stability, it is necessary to first gain a basic appreciation of the underlying theoretical principles. The interconnectedness of deterrence dynamics as seen on the subcontinent fits into a stream of deterrence literature that has emerged since the late 2000s to understand this phenomenon of ‘cross-domain deterrence’ (CDD). CDD looks at escalation paths throughout all levels and realms of conflict. Lindsay and Gartzke define CDD as “the use of threats in one domain, or some combination of different threats, to prevent action in another domain that would change the status quo”.⁵ Others define it as “the use of capabilities of one type to counter threats or combinations of threats of another type in order to prevent unacceptable attacks”.⁶ Mallory adds that CDD entails the threat of employing asymmetric tactics to counter an adversary where it is most

⁴Joshi 2016; Jha 2016; Panda 2016a.

⁵Lindsay and Gartzke 2016.

⁶UCSD 2018.

vulnerable.⁷ In this chapter, CDD will be understood simply as the use of threats in one domain to deter threats in another.

CDD is not new, but merely a widely-spread manifestation of deterrence in the contemporary security environment. Existing theories of deterrence suffice to a large degree to analyse cross-domain stability, such as perfect deterrence theory (PDT). PDT was developed by Zagare and Kilgour as a refinement of classical deterrence theory (CDT) that continues to pervade in contemporary deterrence literature.⁸ In line with structural realism, classical deterrence theorists (including Jervis, Morgenthau, Waltz) see a positive monotonic relationship between balance of power and peace.⁹ According to this theory, symmetry fosters stability and asymmetry leads to instability and crisis. CDT has a tendency towards overkill capabilities (cf. large nuclear stockpiles of the Cold War) because it maintains that prohibitively high costs of war are the best guarantor for deterrence stability.

PDT, like CDT, takes the cost of war as a key element for determining the degree of deterrence stability between two actors: the higher the costs the less likely an actor is going to take action first. However, unlike CDT, PDT relates the cost-benefit-calculus to an actor's satisfaction with the status quo. Furthermore, it challenges CDT's tendency towards overkill capacities by claiming that there is a minimum and maximum threshold to threat effectiveness. It recognises that a quantitative minimum is necessary to convey the threat (e.g. one nuclear weapon has limited deterrent value because it may disfunction or be taken out before its actual use), but also that inflation kicks in at some point (e.g. the added destructive threat of 50.000 vs. 10.000 nuclear weapons is relatively limited).¹⁰ Lastly, there is a difference in the axiomatic basis. CDT assumes that conflict is always the worst possible outcome of any deterrence relationship and therefore assumes that actors have a tendency not to execute threats when challenged by the adversary. This axiom that adversaries always want to avoid conflict is logically inconsistent because it means that adversaries would never want to execute their promised threats if push came to shove.

However, if you prefer not to execute your threat, then how credible is your threat anyway? The presumption that adversaries perceive conflict as the least favourable outcome, implies a presumption that actors are not committed to their threats—which is contradictory with the entire aim of deterrence to manipulate the opponent's behaviour through the use of threats. PDT, on the other hand, argues that, depending on the subject of contestation, the adversary's 'win' could be a worse outcome than conflict. It argues that adversaries *probably* prefer to execute their promised threats. After all, for actors that are dissatisfied with the status quo, it is not unthinkable to prefer conflict to backing down.¹¹

⁷Mallory 2018, p. 1.

⁸Zagare and Kilgour 2000.

⁹See Jervis 1979; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979, 1981.

¹⁰Zagare 2004, p. 128.

¹¹Quackenbusch 2006, p. 534.

Table 12.1 Differences between classical and perfect deterrence theory on the assessment of deterrence stability

Classical deterrence theory	Perfect deterrence theory
<i>Presumptions</i>	
Monotonic positive relationship between cost of war and prevalence of peace	Positive relationship between cost of war and prevalence of peace, although threats have minimal and maximum thresholds
Actors prefer not to execute their threats (conflict is the least-preferred outcome)	Actors <i>probably</i> prefer to execute a threat (adversary's 'win' is the least-preferred outcome)
Threats are implicitly assumed incredible	Threats are assumed as credible
<i>Stability</i>	
Cost of war calculus	Cost of war calculus
Parity/symmetry	Highly valued status quo
	Highly credible threats
	No incentive to execute threat in one domain to deter threats in another

(Source The author)

Table 12.1 captures the differences between CDT and PDT concerning the issue of stability. Deterrence is stable when the deterring actors have no incentive to initiate attack. Mutually subjective interpretations of the cost of war are central to assessing the stability in a deterrence relationship. Deterrence stability is often explained as resulting from a balance of terror, or parity, which Schelling usefully explained as follows: “[if] two powers show themselves equally capable of inflicting damage upon each other by some particular process of war, so that neither gains an advantage from its adoption and both suffer the most hideous reciprocal injuries, it is not only possible but it seems probable that neither will employ that means.”¹² This idea that deterrence stability accrues from parity and the equal capability to inflict prohibitively high costs, befits classical deterrence theory.

Instability, however, is more likely to be caused by dissatisfaction than asymmetry. According to PDT, it is perfectly possible that instability emerges under conditions of power parity or even an asymmetric distribution of power that is unfavourable to the challenger. The higher the level of dissatisfaction with the status quo, the higher the costs of war an actor is willing to accept, the less stable it is. Still, a shortcoming of both PDT and CDT is that they tend to treat deterrence domains in isolation from each other. To analyse deterrence stability in cross-domain contexts it would be useful to add that stability is upheld when there is no incentive to execute a threat in one domain that may escalate to another domain.

Deterrence is stable when the actors involved feel that there is little to be gained from striking first; when the expected benefits are smaller than the expected costs. It is a matter of cost equivalence that works like a system of communicating vessels. Offsetting capabilities, such as new technologies, may affect deterrence stability.

¹²Schelling 2008, p. 19.

However, new technologies are worthless if they are not put to effective use. This is where doctrine comes in. Doctrine dictates best-practices of how to act in a given situation. India's cold start doctrine and Pakistan's full spectrum deterrence doctrine have tied together all domains and levels of conflict, leading many analysts and scholars to call the Indo-Pakistani deterrence relationship highly unstable. The next section addresses crisis behaviour during four events that occurred within the context of the contemporary deterrence landscape. These events serve as a basis to analyse the degree of instability in the contemporary Indo-Pak deterrence relationship.¹³

12.3 Events Since 2015

By and large, cold start and full spectrum deterrence came in effect in 2013. Since then, no major events emerged which could have triggered a crisis in Indo-Pak relations—until 2015. On 27 July, a cell of three LeT-militants attacked a police station in the Punjabi town of Gurdaspur, killing six civilians and one policeman. The militants were reportedly on their way to Pathankot air force base but diverted as dawn was fast approaching.¹⁴ The attack took place only days after the prime ministers of India and Pakistan agreed to formally resume peace talks. Apart from a warning by Home Minister Singh that Islamabad should be ready for a befitting reply, the event did not escalate into a crisis.¹⁵ Later that year Modi and Sharif met on the sidelines of the Paris climate conference, and on Christmas Day Modi paid a surprise birthday visit to Nawaz Sharif in Lahore.¹⁶ The emerging thaw in Indo-Pak relations happened in the midst of an intensification of Indian development assistance to Afghanistan.¹⁷ However, one week after Modi's visit to Lahore, on 2 January 2016, six militants assaulted Pathankot airbase, killing ten Indian army personnel. The attack was claimed by the United Jihad Council (UJC), a coalition of anti-Indian Kashmiri militant groups. New Delhi, sceptical about the claim because the UJC has no history of mounting attacks outside of Kashmir, suspected the involvement of LeT or JeM. A series of militant attacks on Indian diplomatic missions in Afghanistan the following two days indicates a degree of coordination that suggests the involvement of a state actor such as Pakistan's ISI, who were

¹³Joshi 2016; Jha 2016; Panda 2016a.

¹⁴Pendleton 2016, p. 6.

¹⁵India Today 2015a.

¹⁶India Today 2015b.

¹⁷India constructed Afghanistan's new Parliament Building and delivered several Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force.

unhappy with the political developments.¹⁸ India and Pakistan jointly agreed to postpone the agreed upon diplomatic talks.¹⁹

A few months later, on 18 September 2016, four members of JeM attacked a military camp near Uri killing 18 Indian soldiers—the highest casualty number in 20 years at that moment.²⁰ The attack took place three days before Nawaz Sharif addressed the UN General Assembly in which he asked the international community to speak out against Indian human rights violations and to support Kashmiri self-determination. A month before Sharif's speech, Modi gave prominent mention of Pakistan's restive Baluchistan, promising asylum to Baluch separatist leaders during his Independence Day speech. The Uri attack also happened in the midst of a spate of unrest in Indian administered Kashmir. The unrest followed the death of Burhan Wani, the 22-year old leader of an anti-Indian militant group, who was killed in a counterinsurgency operation in July that year. In a public address following the Uri attack, Modi warned Pakistan's leadership that "[...] the sacrifice of our 18 jawans will not go in vain" and promised to isolate Pakistan diplomatically.²¹ India scored a diplomatic success when the SAARC summit, which was to be held in Islamabad in November that year, was cancelled after Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives decided not to show up (Panda 2016b). Similarly, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, a country with which Pakistan maintains friendly ties, accepted an invitation to be the principal guest at the 2017 Indian Republic Day Parade.²² China, Pakistan's 'all weather friend' reportedly indicated that it preferred a change in Pakistan's regional policies. Furthermore, Pakistan's civilian government urged the military leadership to "seek consensus on several key actions" in order to avoid further international isolation.²³ These reports suggest that the Indian effort to isolate Pakistan diplomatically have been relatively successful at the tactical level at least.

Apart from India's diplomatic efforts, the Indian army conducted 'surgical strikes' on the Pakistani side of the LoC. The strikes were not 'surgical' in the Western sense which conceptualises it as the use of precision-guided missiles with limited collateral damage.²⁴ A more adequate description would be 'raid' or 'SOF operation'.²⁵ While rare, surgical strikes are not particularly new. Due to the covert character of such operations, it is difficult to determine how many have taken place. According to some sources at least three such cross-border raids have been

¹⁸Sehmer 2016.

¹⁹BBC 2016.

²⁰Snow 2016.

²¹Economic Times 2016.

²²Kuchay 2019.

²³Almeida 2016.

²⁴Barriot and Bismuth 2008, p. 6.

²⁵Gokhale 2017.

conducted during the Singh-administration.²⁶ Under the Modi administration, such strikes had been conducted at least once before when Indian forces crossed into Myanmar territory to attack an insurgent camp following a series of attacks in the Indian states of Nagaland and Manipur. What is different between then and now, is the publicity that surrounds these operations. Before the strikes were conducted, India is believed to have received tacit approval from the US.²⁷ According to New Delhi significant casualties were inflicted on the terrorists and their supporters. Islamabad, however, flatly denied that commandos crossed into its territory.

In the aftermath of the surgical strikes, cross-LoC skirmished intensified and ultimately led both sides to agree to truce in May 2018.²⁸ In the meantime, popular unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir remained high. In the winter of 2019, on 14 February, Adil Ahmad Darhad, an Indian national from Kashmir drove his explosive-laden car into a convoy of the Central Reserve Police Force on the Srinagar-Jammu highway, killing 44 policemen and injuring 70. The attack was claimed by JeM, which had inspired and supported the perpetrator to carry out the attack. Modi declared that India “[...] will give a befitting reply; our neighbour will not be allowed to destabilise us [...] our security forces are given full freedom”.²⁹ Similar to the Uri aftermath, India sought to isolate Pakistan diplomatically. As with any terrorist attack on Indian soil, Pakistani leaders condemned it and denied involvement. Similarly, as in previous major crises, India recalled its ambassador from Pakistan (Pakistan followed suit), revoked its MFN-status and suspended cross-border bus and train services. In addition to that, customs duties were increased with 200%, threats were made to stop the water flow to Pakistan as guaranteed under the Indus Water Treaty, and the state government of Jammu and Kashmir withdrew the security of separatist leaders.

The crisis turned kinetic as both armies traded fire along the LoC in late February. A Pakistan Army spokesperson claimed that “[Pakistan] shall dominate the escalation ladder” and gave reference to crisis meetings of the National Command Authority, which oversees Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal.^{30,31} As anti-Pakistan demonstrations were held across India, and keeping in mind that Indian elections would take place only weeks later, Modi may have felt the urge to act. In the early morning of 26 February, a squadron of IAF Mirage 2000s conducted airstrikes on JeM-training centres near the town of Balakot in Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. It was the first time since 1971 that Indian fighters conducted an airstrike on undisputed Pakistani soil (i.e. outside of Kashmir). Pakistan responded by closing its airspace for Indian airliners and positioning tanks along the LoC in the Sialkot sector, close to the city of Jammu. It also retaliated by sending

²⁶India Today 2016.

²⁷Chaudhury 2018.

²⁸Abi-Habib and Kumar 2018.

²⁹Abi-Habib et al. 2019.

³⁰ISPR 2019.

³¹Miller 2019.

JF-17s and F-16s into Indian administered Kashmir the next day. In the ensuing air battle at least one Indian MiG-21 was downed on the Pakistani side of the LoC and the pilot was taken prisoner. The following day, on 28 February, Prime Minister Imran Khan warned the Indian leadership in a televised public address about the nuclear capabilities that both countries have and called on India to show restraint and proposed to restart talks.³² The next day Pakistan released the Indian pilot as a “gesture of peace”.³³ Early March Pakistan started a crackdown against Islamist groups, detaining more than 100 individuals and putting nearly 200 madrassas under control. Around the same time the international train, the Samjhauta Express, resumed service and Indian general elections were held which Modi’s BJP-party won in a landslide. In July Pakistan fully reopened its airspace to Indian companies and both ambassadors were back at their posts.

12.4 Assessment

All of the aforementioned crises were claimed or suspected to be conducted by Pakistan-supported groups. The events show a stark discrepancy between theory and practice, as is illustrated in Fig. 12.1. The doctrinally predicted escalation spiral was not set in motion even though the ingredients of its commencement—a Pakistan-supported terrorist attack on Indian soil—were present. Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Uri and Pulwama proved insufficient to trigger a cold start-like response. Following Gurdaspur and Pathankot India decided not to escalate the event into crisis, probably for want of giving the new Indo-Pak rapprochement a chance.³⁴ However, the cumulative pressure of these attacks combined with domestic outcry over the high number of Indian casualties in the Uri and Pulwama attacks have provoked an unprecedented reaction in New Delhi. These crises demonstrated that there is more room for conventional escalation below the nuclear threshold than doctrine predicted.

What does this say about deterrence stability when applying the stability indicators of perfect deterrence theory? It is clear that, while India is geographically relatively content with the present situation, Pakistan is displeased with the status quo in Kashmir. However, this discontentment may not automatically translate into a broadly shared vision that open conflict with India could be a cost-acceptable (or: beneficial) endeavour. A large conflict with India, which might involve nuclear first use on the part of Pakistan, would arguably leave it worse off than in the already dire present situation. Pakistan’s economy is in a shambles and its relations with western countries, including the US, has been decaying over the past few years. If it

³²Safi and Zahra-Malik 2019a.

³³Safi and Zahra-Malik 2019b.

³⁴Lalwani and Haegeland 2018 have given an excellent account of why one event escalates to the level of crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations, while others do not.

Fig. 12.1 Contemporary cross-domain deterrence dynamics in the Indo-Pak deterrence environment (Source The author)

initiated a nuclear first strike, as per full-spectrum deterrence in response to cold start, it may well be portrayed as an international pariah state, which makes the status quo arguably better than a ‘post-TNW status quo’. In terms of threat credibility, it appears that both countries take each other’s doctrines seriously. After all, despite doubts about whether India can pull off a cold start-like intervention, Pakistan took it seriously enough to come up with full-spectrum deterrence.

The fact that India regularly conducts military exercises under cold start-like conditions,³⁵ give further credence to this notion. We cannot be sure that India did not carry out a cold start-scripted limited air-land intervention inside Pakistani territory out of fear of crossing the nuclear threshold. But the fact that New Delhi opted for alternative ways to retaliate conventionally despite having trained formations along the Pakistani border supports the argument that Pakistan’s deterrent was successful in shaping India’s retaliatory response. By not operationalising cold start and TNWs the threat of nuclear escalation remained remote. Pulwama and Uri were also novel in that there was very little nuclear signalling, unlike during Kargil and the 2001–2002 Twin Peaks crisis (when India did not have a cold start doctrine up its sleeve to counter terror “attacks”). This could be either because both sides sought to steer clear from using any nuclear escalatory language in order to prevent raising tensions even further, or because the adversaries believed that the conditions

³⁵Examples of these exercises include *Sindu Sudarshan-VII* (November 2019), *Vijay Prahar* (May 2018), *Mamesha Vijayee* (December 2017), *Thar Shakti* (May 2017), *Chakravayuh-II* (May 2016), *Shatrujeet* (April 2016).

for a nuclear escalation were not present. The rapid pace of escalation following Pulwama may have deterred Pakistan from stepping up the ante. If this is true, then escalation had a de-escalatory effect.

The cost of war in the nuclear realm is thus perceived as high by both India and Pakistan. These explanations all argue in favour of a degree of stability in the nuclear realm. While there are clear incentives to avoid the initiation of a threat (e.g. limited incursion inside Pakistani territory) that could lead to escalation into the nuclear realm, this incentive appears largely absent in the conventional and sub-conventional domains. Considering the ongoing insurgent attacks by organisations such as LeT and JeM, Pakistan continues to see benefit in supporting these proxies against India. New Delhi's quest to seek ways to punish and deter Pakistan-supported insurgencies, manifests in various counter-efforts below the nuclear threshold of which the surgical strikes and airstrikes are the most recent examples. This is supportive of the stability-instability paradox which holds that "despite increased tensions and severe crises, nuclear-armed adversaries will avoid a major conflict or a nuclear exchange".³⁶ While nuclear weapons put a cap on the risk of escalation to large scale conflict that may escalate into the nuclear realm, interstate competition shifts and intensifies on the sub-nuclear levels allowing for more low-intensity conflicts.³⁷

12.5 Context and Narrative

The question, then, is: how unstable are the sub-nuclear realms? Context and narratives are important aspects to look into. As for context, India and Pakistan have been at odds over Kashmir for as long as they exist. Despite a 2003 ceasefire agreement, cross-LoC incursions of militants as well as cross-LoC shootings which include artillery shelling, have remained persistent to the present day.³⁸ In that context, surgical strikes may appear less destabilising than at first sight might be expected, especially because surgical strikes have been conducted under previous administrations too. The covert character, however, made that little to no information about these operations was disclosed to the public. The Indian government's overtness surrounding these strikes deviated from the norm, but was primarily intended to appease a domestic public that had grown increasingly disconcerted with the restrictive manner in which the hawkish Modi administration had acted in the previous two events (cf. no punishment following Gurdaspur and Pathankot).³⁹ In going overt with the surgical strikes, India failed to give incontrovertible proof of the raids' effect. Whether this was intentional or not, it allowed Pakistan to simply

³⁶Krepon 2004, p. 2.

³⁷Rauchhaus 2009.

³⁸Jacob 2017.

³⁹Haidar 2016.

deny the surgical strikes from having taken place, ‘saving’ its face and not having a reason to escalate the event.

The airstrikes following the Pulwama attack were a clear break with the past. For the first time in almost 50 years the IAF operated outside the Kashmiri theatre inside uncontested Pakistani territory. Moreover, escalation followed an attack that was unique in that it was JeM-supported but performed by an Indian national who had procured the explosives locally.⁴⁰ The fact that the attack was conducted by an Indian national may have made the justification of a cold start-like intervention less obvious, but it is nonetheless a development that raises concern for at least two reasons. First, it suggests that Indian administered Kashmir has an ecosystem of its own that breeds militancy, and second, it shows that attacks claimed by Pakistan-supported groups but carried out by Indian nationals would suffice to reply with the type of response as we have seen in February 2019. However, when zooming in on the narratives surrounding the airstrikes one notes a degree of de-escalatory parlance within the larger escalatory context. India called its airstrikes ‘preventive’ in nature and directed against ‘non-military targets’, while Pakistan claimed that its warplanes intentionally decided to strike uninhabited areas rather than military installations ‘to send a message’ and ‘to avoid human loss and collateral damage’.⁴¹ Another break with the past was Pakistan’s de-escalatory behaviour. PM Khan, who can ill-afford armed conflict due to Pakistan’s economic hardship and his electoral promise to establish an Islamic welfare state, urged for restraint throughout the Pulwama crisis. The limited damage that both strikes incurred, the de-escalatory parlance that both adversaries used during the airstrikes and Khan’s outreach to Modi to resume talks signal that both states had little interest in escalating the conflict any further.

12.6 Conclusion

Thankfully, doctrine has proven to be a poor predictor of crisis behaviour in practice on the subcontinent. It was wrong in at least two ways. First, the cross-domain escalation spiral was not set in motion despite the occurrence of events which could have triggered it. Second, India showed that there is more room for conventional escalation than was previously assumed. This may partially be because both countries consider their respective doctrinal threats as real and credible. Certainly in the nuclear realm, the cost of war is perceived as high. The events since 2015 demonstrate that there is a shared reluctance by both sides to escalate to the nuclear realm. Efforts to offset each other are concentrated in practice on the conventional and sub-conventional realms. This is an indication that the nuclear realm is more stable than the sub-nuclear realm and demonstrates that there

⁴⁰Abi-Habib et al. 2019.

⁴¹Regan and Kumar 2019.

is a clear stability-instability paradox at play. Furthermore, it could be argued that the status quo may be valued more by both sides, including Pakistan, than one might suggest. These findings all indicate that deterrence is less unstable than is assumed by many analysts and scholars.

In assessing the degree of instability in the sub-nuclear realms, it is important to take note of the strategic context and narratives that surround crisis behaviour. Surgical strikes did not deviate much from the traditional *modus operandi* across the LoC. While the airstrikes proved a break with the past that gives reason for concern, there was a lot of signalling that both sides were not intent on letting the situation escalate beyond limited actions. Of course, signalling commitment to not let things spiral out of control is hardly a guarantor that escalation will be limited to a certain level. As soon as conflicts erupt, events may lead a life of their own, causing a conflict to escalate to unintended larger proportions. Nonetheless, a closer look at Indo-Pak crisis behaviour showed that there are more escalation dampening mechanisms at play than appears at face value.

It is always easy to make *ex post* assessments. Assessments of the past may not be a confident predictor of future crisis behaviour. The Indo-Pak deterrence environment is volatile. Efforts to offset each other's capabilities may overthrow the status quo, which may or may not be nefarious to deterrence stability. The airstrikes are currently a one-off ($n = 1$) event and it is too early to tell whether this is exemplary for future crisis behaviour. However, considering that Pakistan has a particular interest in avoiding a conventional confrontation with India, Pakistan may well seek to plug the deterrence gap that India exploited. As India continues to seek ways to deter terrorist attacks, Pakistan may revise full spectrum deterrence in such a way that it creates an option for nuclear use after any conventional strike inside its territory. As Pakistani Lieutenant-General Tariq Khan said: "Our response should be to escalate and push the envelope of hostilities so that nuclear war is a likely outcome" on the expectation that India "simply will not go down this road" because it has more to lose.⁴² If this is the case, then the threshold for nuclear escalation is lowered and the competition in risk-taking is brought to a new level again. The question is how both states will react in the next crisis. The modalities of the deterrence landscape may change profoundly as both states introduce new weapons technology and doctrines. While volatility is not the same as instability, volatility goes hand in hand with unpredictability and may be a prelude for instability following near-future changes. New weapons technology and doctrine alone, however, are not enough to make a balanced assessment of deterrence stability—these are enablers of new escalation trajectories. In making sound assessments of deterrence stability, it is at least as import to look into the strategic context and intent or propensity towards escalation as expressed through crisis narratives and actor satisfaction with the status quo, as per perfect deterrence theory.

⁴²Swami 2019.

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