

Recurring India-Pakistan Crises and the Danger of Inadvertent Escalation

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Abstract

Barry Posen has, in his study on Inadvertent Escalation, raised a very pertinent question asking, 'Can Nuclear Powers fight conventional wars with each other and avoid the use of nuclear weapons?' This question should always be kept in mind by all nuclear powers especially those with mutually hostile relationships. It is evident that the phenomenon of 'Inadvertent Escalation' cannot be understood without understanding the process of Escalation. South Asia despite nuclearization of the region in 1998, has been facing one crisis after another each more belligerent than the preceding one and with the potential to wittingly or unwittingly embroil the antagonists into an irreversible escalation cycle with potentially catastrophic consequences. This paper is aimed at sensitising the decision makers in both countries to the dangers inherent in recurring crises especially in the absence of any overarching restraint regime and to make them understand that they might have escaped devastating results in the previous crises merely due to sheer good luck and not any prudence on their part. A case study of February 2019 crisis, between India and Pakistan, has been employed to bring home the point.

Keywords

Escalation, Inadvertent Escalation, Nuclear, Kargil, Surgical strikes, Pulwama-Balakot-Rajauri, Third party brokering, Mediation, Honest brokers.

Introduction

Barry Posen in his landmark study on Inadvertent Escalation raised a critically important question which should haunt all nuclear weapon

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states especially those locked in adversarial relationships. He asked, '*Can nuclear powers fight conventional wars with each other and avoid the use of nuclear weapons?*'¹ However, to understand the phenomenon of Inadvertent Escalation one has to first grasp the essentials and dynamics of Escalation itself. This paper will endeavour to study the dynamics of escalation in a dyadic nuclear relationship and how this escalation cycle can be triggered inadvertently by the actions and reactions of one or both of the antagonists in the light of some of the more recent crises between India and Pakistan. It will analyse the crises as they unfolded as well as the various possible outcomes had one or the other belligerents acted in a different manner than they actually did. This may serve as a guide for the decision makers to modulate their reactions by sensitising them to the dangerous possibilities inherent in such crises. This is important because the decision making by leaders in crisis situations is usually influenced by their predispositions based on their past experiences without giving much thought to the fact that catastrophic outcomes in the previous crisis may have been averted owing to good luck or chance rather than their own prudence. Also, during crisis situations both parties tend to play the 'Game of Chicken' with each other wherein each player tries to test the resolve of the other and stretches his brinkmanship in the light of the behaviour of the opponent in the previous crisis without giving due allowance to the human unpredictability and the possibility of unforeseen outcomes of certain actions intended to produce different results. It may be pertinent here to elaborate the concepts of escalation and inadvertent escalation before we could proceed to analyse the recent Indo-Pakistan crises to highlight how these could have unfolded very differently from what actually happened.

Escalation and its Dynamics

According to Lawrence Freedman, "the growth process in warfare came to be described as escalation,"² while William Kaufman explained that,

“Because of its competitive character war places a heavy premium upon the attainment of an advantage, however fleeting and this in turn invites imitation. As the belligerents strive to gain a comparative advantage, the conflict undergoes an expansion.”³ Richard Smoke defines escalation in terms of a movement across limits previously constraining both sides, or a step of any size that crosses a saliency...⁴ Schelling on his part has argued that, “...violence, especially in war, is a confused and uncertain activity, highly unpredictable depending on decisions made by fallible human beings organized into imperfect governments, depending on fallible communications and warning systems. It is furthermore a hot-headed activity, in which commitments and reputations can develop a momentum of their own.”⁵

An eminent British strategic expert Michael Quinlan has likened ‘escalation’ to action reaction syndrome wherein action by either side is bound to invoke a reaction by the other to restore its advantage or to make up for the disadvantage caused by the opponent’s action and this process will gradually raise the level and scope of violence .⁶ He also avers that in a conflict, the likelihood of escalation opens up as soon as the conflict commences and not necessarily with the initiation of nuclear exchanges.⁷ He further explains that, “...escalation is neither a physical process like a chemical chain-reaction nor a sequence of random events like outcomes on a gambling machine. It is a matter of interactive choices by people. It has to be considered, therefore, in human and political terms, not just as a matter of military or technical mechanics...”⁸ Dilating on the unpredictability of the escalation dynamics Quinlan asserts that, the probability of escalation can neither be 100 per cent nor it can be zero. Between these two extremes, however, it is impossible to ascertain with any degree of certainty as to where it would exactly be situated.⁹ However, he cautions that, for deterrence to be viable an inherent risk of escalation is a pre-requisite.¹⁰

Herman Kahn, one of the classical theorists of nuclear strategy, famous for his innovative concept of a 44 rung escalation ladder¹¹ describing the possible sequence of events starting with the onset of a crisis and moving up and across various thresholds culminating in the ultimate nuclear showdown has defined and elaborated the concept of escalation in broad terms as, “an increase in the level of conflict in international crisis situations.”¹² He contends that, “In a typical escalation situation, there is likely to be a competition in risk taking or at least resolve, and a matching of local resources, in some form of a limited conflict between the two sides...the fear that the other side may react, indeed overreact, is most likely to deter escalation, and not the undesirability or costs of the escalation itself...”¹³ In Kahn’s view escalation can take place in three possible ways. First, the conflict can escalate through a quantitative increase in the intensity of the conflict, which could take the form of an upsurge in the quantum of equipment and forces already being used or introducing new categories of weapons or increasing the extent of targets being engaged.¹⁴ The second path to escalation could be through a widening of the area of conflict which could take different forms such as hot pursuits or attacking certain areas hither-to-fore considered as no go areas. The third possible means of escalation could be through initiation of a new crisis in a geographically different area or by attacking the allies of the enemy. This has also been termed as “Compound Escalation.”¹⁵ However, this could only be relevant to scenarios of a conflict between two alliances with strategic reach spanning the globe and would have little relevance to the South Asian security environment.

Herman Kahn has elaborated the escalation dynamics in a two sided or dyadic confrontation in great detail. However, it would suffice here to summarize the main strands of his arguments. In the first eventuality, either of the two belligerents would be emboldened to employ enough resources in a confrontation to achieve victory, if the other side fails to respond to the provocation. Again, if the victory carries high dividends

either side would be tempted to commit itself to escalation dominance if it senses that the opponent doesn't have the desired level of resolve for a matching response. However, since the higher rungs of escalation ladder are fraught with dangerous outcomes both belligerents would like to avoid getting there. The two parties would also have a stake in what Kahn terms "systems bargaining" which essentially means they would have a mutual interest to avoid crossing the tacitly or explicitly recognized thresholds. The contending sides would either adopt a strategy that corresponds to different levels of escalation and their underlying factors or employ strategies that manipulate the risk of escalation to their advantage by discouraging the other side from escalating. Finally, neither side would like to be viewed by the other as a rational, cool and calculating actor in its approach nor would it prefer to be seen as reckless and unreliable in order to maintain some balance and stability in the adversarial equation. However, they have to be mindful of the fact that being overcome by a fit of rage, or getting overwhelmed by emotions, or committing an apparently minor miscalculation or taking an erroneous decision, either of them can cause devastating outcomes.¹⁶ Kahn has also drawn an analogy between escalation and 'the game of chicken' stating that, "one side must convey the impression to the other side that the opponent must be the one to give way, or at least accept a reasonable compromise, yet both sides are trying to get the message across."¹⁷

One thing, though, is certain that the 'balance of terror' is bound to persuade the actors involved to restrain their actions and behave with a degree of discretion. They would be mindful of the inherent instability of deterrence strategies and would desist from doing things that may subject that already tenuous stability to further stresses and strains. They would also be careful not to do anything that may incite an ill-considered response from the opponent and would be careful to respect the taboos and conventions that have been understood by both sides to ensure the

longevity of their mutual deterrence. Any attempt to infringe these rules by any side is certain to produce nothing but catastrophic results.¹⁸

The preceding discussion makes it amply clear that no rational actor would make a deliberate effort to escalate an ongoing crisis or conflict. The most probable way in which a situation could escalate would be through 'inadvertence,' that is to say, because of unintended consequences of some imprudent actions on part of one or the other or at times both parties involved. It may be pertinent here to discuss the concept of inadvertent escalation and to explore various scenarios and actions that can cause such a thing to happen.

The Concept of Inadvertent Escalation

Inadvertent escalation, as is obvious from the term itself, results from unintended consequences of certain military actions, misunderstandings, misperceptions or misreading of the opponent's resolve and not through pre-meditated, pre-planned, or well considered operations. For instance, large scale conventional attacks, especially those involving offensive air operations, would always have the likelihood of accidentally causing damage to a part of enemy's strategic delivery systems, weapons storage sites or facilities which are part of its nuclear command and control system or its early warning assets. In the fog of war with emotions running high it would be impossible to determine whether it was a pre-meditated operation or otherwise and would result in unintended or inadvertent escalation. An Indian analyst Rajesh Rajagopalan has argued that if the Indians or Pakistanis knew beforehand that a particular installation is likely to have strategic assets storage on site, they would in likelihood avoid targeting that facility.¹⁹

Barry Posen believes that in the event of a struggle to defend their critical national interests, states with nuclear weapons will use these weapons rather than compromise on these interests. He considers this as one pathway to escalation from conventional to nuclear war. Secondly, he

suggests that in the course of large-scale conflict conventional military forces might directly encroach upon enemy's nuclear assets and thereby reduce the effectiveness of these forces resulting in lowering of the confidence particularly in the viability of its second-strike capability. Such random attacks by conventional forces against nuclear forces are inevitable during a large-scale conventional conflict. These occurrences can be characterized as 'inadvertent escalation.'²⁰ He even suggests that conventional operations that deliberately threaten nuclear forces in order to facilitate the attainment of their objectives should also fall under the category of inadvertent escalation. Additionally, widespread conventional attacks aimed at a vital piece of territory, could raise the possibility of unintended collision between conventional and nuclear forces. This could result in undermining the strategic communications and command and control mechanisms or causing some damage to the forces protecting strategic assets and would, therefore, invoke a powerful reaction by the target country. As a result, a violent action-reaction cycle even more dangerous than the original provocation would be triggered.

Geographical configuration of the two antagonists and the kind of conventional weapons they are employing would also be determining factors in whether offensive and defensive operations can be discernible. This blurring of distinction between the two would be more pronounced in countries with constricted geography, as the distances separating the conventional and strategic targets would be inadequate. This factor is especially relevant to the South Asian environment. Moreover, as Clausewitz explains, "the general unreliability of all information presents a special problem in war: all action takes place so to speak, in a kind of twilight, which like fog or moonlight, often tends to make things seem grotesque and larger than they really are."²¹ This uncertain nature of the available information further clouds the vision and judgement of the decision makers and contributes to enhancing the chances of inadvertent escalation by causing loss of control over the ongoing military operations

on part of the leadership as well as by enhancing the threat of surprise attack by the adversary. This is especially true of the unbridled offensive operations where initiative passes into the hands of the field commanders, as would be the case in the eventuality of launching of the kind of operations envisaged in India's 'Cold Start' military doctrine. The fog of war, especially with limited intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities would cause uncertainties about the operational readiness status of the enemy's nuclear forces and might prompt a knee-jerk reaction due to misperception and misunderstanding of the inconclusive information.

Of late due to advancements in conventional military technologies that have resulted in enhancing the speed and accuracy of conventional weapon systems such as hypersonic glide vehicles and hypersonic cruise missiles. These advanced technologies have created new possibilities of inadvertent escalation due to 'entanglement' of conventional weapons with nuclear weapons and their associated systems. As James Acton has explained:

"Entanglement has various dimensions: dual use delivery systems that can be armed with nuclear and non-nuclear warheads; the comingling of nuclear and non-nuclear forces and their support structures; and non-nuclear threats to nuclear weapons and their associated command, control, communications and information (C3) systems. Technological developments are currently increasing the entanglement of non-nuclear weapons with nuclear weapons and their enabling capabilities."²²

The threat of entanglement can materialize in two ways; first, by using highly accurate and precise non-nuclear weapons for a disarming first strike against nuclear forces and second, mistakenly causing damage to nuclear weapons and delivery systems including strategic bombers and

SSBNs which are located at same military bases alongside conventional systems. Such threats are being viewed with great concern by the Russians and Chinese²³ and may explain the recent qualitative developments of Russian arsenal including advanced delivery systems and the suspected quantitative increase in Chinese strategic arsenal. In South Asia due to geographical contiguity of the two antagonists as well as restricted geography of Pakistan the problem of entanglement will assume even more serious proportions especially in case of a major conventional war or even in a limited conflict where deep air strikes are employed against critical targets.

Having discussed the conceptual framework of Escalation as well as Inadvertent Escalation we can now proceed to explore the specifics of the South Asian situation in the backdrop of the preceding discussion.

Inadvertent Escalation Potential in South Asia

South Asia has a long history of conflictual relations between India and Pakistan including three wars, several border skirmishes, almost perpetual shooting matches across the Line of Control dividing the Indian occupied and Pakistani controlled parts of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. These active military confrontations have been interspersed with some serious crises. However, hopes were raised after the overt nuclearization of India and Pakistan, in May 1998, that an era of relative peace and stability would be ushered in the region consequent to the establishment of a mutual deterrence equation between the two neighbours. India has, however, been challenging the viability of the Pakistani nuclear deterrence by propagating the idea, since early 2000, that there was still a scope for a limited conventional war below the nuclear threshold, while Pakistan has been asserting the efficacy of its nuclear deterrence. This war of narratives has been aptly summed up by Indian security analyst Ali Ahmed stating that, “The tussle is between India pulling up the window for military options below the nuclear level

and Pakistan thrusting down the nuclear awning over it.”²⁴ India’s current ‘Cold Start’ limited war doctrine²⁵ is highly provocative and raises the possibilities of inadvertent escalation in a future conflict between the two countries. Though, there has been no major clash of arms between India and Pakistan since 1998, except the Kargil conflict in 1999,²⁶ that remained confined to a narrow stretch of the Line of Control, there have been several serious crises between the two countries each with the potential to erupt into a major war with the omnipresent danger of escalation into a nuclear conflict. The probability of such an outcome is especially high in the absence of an overarching restraint regime or even a bilateral crisis management mechanism. It may be instructive here to analyse in some detail some unique escalation dynamics in South Asia due to the geographical contiguity of the two nuclear antagonists and a longstanding dispute over the status of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Both countries have accused each other of perpetrating acts of violence in each other’s territory through non-state proxies. In the past few years there has been a tendency in the Indian media to point accusatory fingers at Pakistan immediately after any violent incident in India or Indian occupied Kashmir without waiting for the outcome of even the preliminary investigations into the incident. Some of these incidents have later proved to be stage managed by the Indian security establishment not only to malign Pakistan but also painting the indigenous Kashmiri struggle for independence from Indian occupation as a terrorist movement. Such incidents have interestingly coincided with high-level American visits to India.²⁷ The effect of these boisterous media campaigns is also discernible in most western analyses and publications. It has even permeated the think tanks and academia in the US, and the standard narrative setting the scene for table top exercises for studying South Asian crisis scenarios invariably starts with a Pakistan sponsored or supported terrorist incident in some part of India or the Indian occupied

Jammu and Kashmir. However, of late some well-informed American analysts and even some Indian scholars have started looking at the alternative scenarios of initiation of a serious Indo-Pakistan crisis by Indian military actions across the Line of Control in Kashmir. In such an eventuality the escalation dynamics of a future crisis between India and Pakistan would be very different from what has been experienced in the past.

In the past, crises were usually triggered by some violent incident on Indian territory or in the Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir region purportedly carried out by Pakistan based non-state actors with or without the support of the Pakistani state. India has, customarily accused Pakistani security establishment of direct or indirect involvement in such instances. Once the hype had been created, the onus was on India to undertake some kind of reprisal to satisfy its own domestic constituencies. However, the response would not be time sensitive in this scenario and could take from a week to several weeks to materialise. In the meantime, India would use its media for propaganda, as well as diplomatic outreach to convince the international community to endorse its forthcoming aggressive actions as justified.

More recently and especially after the Pulwama-Balakot-Rajauri crisis of February 2019, it has been suggested by some US analysts as well as alluded to by some Indian scholars that the trigger for a future crisis between India and Pakistan may be different from the traditional stereotypes. As Toby Dalton has postulated that:

“...conventional wisdom holds that it will follow a script common to successive crises since the early 1990s. The pattern starts with a high-casualty terror attack in India, attributed to Pakistan-based militant groups with a long history of carrying out cross-border operations, which then puts the onus on India to calibrate escalation in its response.

Just because nearly every crisis between India and Pakistan in the last three decades began with an act of cross-border terrorism, however, does not mean that other potential catalysts should be neglected. One intriguing alternative deserves scrutiny: Instead of an attack in India that initiates crisis, what if one arose following a proactive Indian operation to seize territory over the Line of Control (LOC) in the portion of the disputed territory of Kashmir controlled by Pakistan?...²⁸

Indian academic and security analyst Happyman Jacob has alluded to just the kind of eventuality mentioned by Toby Dalton, referring to an Indian military plan, that was to be put into effect in the summer of 2001. The plan codenamed 'operation Kabbaddi' (a South Asian origin sport somewhat similar to wrestling) envisaged a cross LOC operation all along the length and breadth of the LOC starting from the Batalik sector up North to the Chamb-Jaurian sector down South, spanning defences occupied by 12-14 Pakistani brigades and involving the capture of 25-30 Pakistani military posts, aimed at completely changing the geography of the LOC. Yet, despite the expansive sweep of the operation, he was told during his conversations with the Indian military, that this was intended to be a limited operation designed to stay below the nuclear threshold.²⁹ Had the Indians actually embarked on such a provocative and risky operation it could easily have led to unintended consequences, beyond the imagination of the planners of the operation, though they were trying to delude themselves into believing that this would be viewed by Pakistan as a limited operation and would not invoke any serious escalation. Such an operation had all the ingredients of culminating in wider conventional conflict leading to inadvertent nuclear escalation. The operation however, could not be put into effect due to the unexpected catastrophic events of 9/11 in the United States followed by the US reprisal attacks against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The possibility of Indian military planners

conceiving a similar operation and even blundering into executing it cannot be completely ruled out especially given the track record of the Modi government in India to give a free rein to its military to choose the timing, scale and venue of the so-called revenge attacks as was done during the February 2019 crisis.³⁰ It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Indian military might have dusted and opened some of their old files from the archives and might well have entertained the thought of reviving the un-executed 'Operation Kabaddi' or a similar unfulfilled dream.

In case a future crisis is precipitated by an Indian military action across the Line of Control whether within the Pakistan administered territory of Jammu and Kashmir or inside Pakistani territory itself, the burden of a response would be on Pakistan. In this case, though, the aggressor is clearly identifiable and time will be at a premium for any counter action by Pakistan. Any Pakistani action would also have to be proportionate to the offense or a little more than that in line with the declared Pakistani policy of 'quid-pro-quo plus.'³¹ The big question however, is whether the action-reaction cycle would end here or continue with India retaliating to Pakistani reprisal and Pakistan responding in equal measure leading both sides to climbing further rungs up the escalation ladder irrespective of the fact that this may not have been the original intention. Such an eventuality would surely fall under the category of 'Inadvertent Escalation.' It may be useful here to examine more closely one of the more recent crises as it unfolded as well as a whole host of possibilities of serious escalation inherent in it, had it developed somewhat differently especially in view of lack of any meaningful attempt by outside powers to help in the de-escalation of the crisis as had been the norm in the past crises. It must also be noted that the crisis behaviour of the players and the nature of their responses is greatly influenced by the prevailing domestic and to some degree the international environment which provide the backdrop of the crisis. In India's case its relations with

Pakistan have become a part of their electoral politics and most recent crises have coincided with either state elections in some politically important states in India, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP) or national elections. The Narendra Modi led hard-line Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has found a winning formula in hyping up anti-Pakistan rhetoric. The Pulwama incident, irrespective of the motives behind it, played straight into the hands of PM Modi, then in the thick of the campaign for the forthcoming national elections due in May 2019 and he exploited it to the hilt.

The Pulwama – Balakot – Rajauri Crisis – A Case Study

This is the latest of the crises between India and Pakistan that gripped the region in February 2019. It was precipitated when a young local Kashmiri dissident carried out a suicide attack on 14th of February near Pulwama on a convoy carrying Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel killing at least 40 officers and men.³² Given the fact that this attack happened in the midst of electioneering for national level parliamentary elections in India the Modi government decided to take full political advantage of it to bolster its campaign for re-election. Consequently, the Indian government authorised the Indian Air Force (IAF) to launch another so called ‘surgical strike’ against a seminary belonging to Jaish-e-Muhammad the militant group that was purportedly behind this attack.

The Indian reprisal strike carried out at 3 am on 26th of February, however, was unprecedented since it involved IAF for the first time and the target itself was not in the Pakistani administered Kashmir but in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan some 80 kilometres from the LOC which made the provocation far more serious.³³ The Indian officials claimed to have killed 300-350 budding militants in the strike using Israeli made stand-off air to ground missiles. However, they were unable to provide any evidence to corroborate their claims. In reality, the

missiles missed their target by some margin and landed in the nearby forest causing no casualties whatsoever. Pakistan lived up to its declared intent to forcefully respond to any military action by India at a place and time of its choice by launching a retaliatory air strike on 27th of February in broad daylight in the Nowshera - Rajauri area in the Indian occupied Kashmir in an operation aptly code named 'Swift Retort.' However, since the Indian strike had not caused any casualties, Pakistani strikes were also modulated in a manner that the aircraft directed their ordnance to hit uninhabited spaces in the vicinity of important Indian military targets. As some IAF jets scrambled to intercept them at least one Indian MIG-21 was shot down on the Pakistani side and its pilot captured alive. The pilot was later handed over to India by Pakistan as a 'goodwill gesture' that helped defuse the crisis. However, before the crisis subsided there were other twists and turns wherein as per media reports India had conveyed threats to launch missile strikes against six Pakistani targets³⁴ and Pakistan responded by pronouncing that it would retaliate with three times the number. However, these threats did not materialise, otherwise the crisis would have then crossed many qualitative thresholds and might well have gone all the way up the escalation ladder. Knowledgeable Pakistani and Indian analysts have highlighted the dangers inherent in missile duel between two nuclear armed states. Ejaz Haider has argued that, "an exchange of missiles would have remarkable escalation potential." Adding that, "Missilery between nuclear powers is a big no." Well known Indian journalist Shekhar Gupta concurs saying that, "Both sides know the implications of even one ballistic missile... that is why all ballistic missiles, in both countries, have been taken away from conventional forces and put under the charge of their respective strategic force commands."³⁵

It is evident that India was encouraged to undertake this highly provocative and risky venture emboldened by the partisan statements by senior US officials that denounced Pakistan, but neither counselled

restraint to the two parties nor did they emphasise the need for a negotiated solution to the crisis. US National Security Advisor John Bolton clearly seemed to encourage a military action by India by supporting India's right to self-defence in the face of what he termed as 'cross-border terrorism.'³⁶ The two Prime Ministers had also boxed themselves into commitment traps from which it was difficult to go back. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had publicly "threatened, 'a fitting response' for the Pulwama attack, stating 'this is an India of new convention and policy,' a posture which Indian analysts subsequently branded as the 'new normal'..."³⁷ Modi had also committed to "punish the perpetrators of terror and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan vowed that Pakistan will retaliate to any Indian strike."³⁸ Modi kept the rhetoric alive long after the crisis had subsided by continuing to make inflammatory statements during election rallies.

The genesis of this crisis can be found in September 2016 claim by India of having carried out a ground surgical strike across the Line of Control in Kashmir against the alleged terrorist launch pads in retaliation to an attack purportedly by Kashmiri freedom fighters against an Indian military cantonment at Uri in the disputed territory. Many Indian military analysts such as Praveen Sawhney have described this so-called surgical strike as a routine happening astride the LOC where fire raids against each other's posts are interspersed with physical raids against the same. Pakistan on its part refused to accept that any such action had taken place which was variously interpreted in India as well as the west as a Pakistani ploy to avoid embarrassment as in their opinion the Pakistani military was either unable or unwilling to respond to this Indian action. This author firmly believes that irrespective of whether this surgical strike actually happened or not Pakistan should have taken the Indian claims on the face value and retaliated accordingly to discourage such adventures in future. This might well have prevented the hostile Indian action in February 2019 by imposing caution on them. As in the 'game of chicken' if

one of the players appears to have shown weak resolve in the previous encounter the opponent is encouraged to take greater risks the next time around since it believes that the other side will back off again thereby setting a dangerous precedent.

Alternative Possibilities, Scenarios, and Unintended Outcomes

Having given a broad overview of the way the crisis actually unfolded, one can now proceed to hypothesise the alternative possibilities, scenarios and unintended consequences whose basic ingredients were inbuilt in the crisis. Let us take some of the alternative outcomes had the crisis unfolded differently at different stages one by one as under:-

- What if, the Indian claim of having killed hundreds of seminary students whom they had arbitrarily labelled as potential terrorists had turned out to be true. It would have resulted in large numbers of body bags going to Pakistani villages and towns. In an era where every individual carrying a smart phone is a virtual live reporter there would have been a tremendous public outrage in Pakistan putting pressure on the government to settle the scores. In that eventuality, Pakistani air strikes would not have been calibrated to avoid casualties but instead would have been aimed at causing large number of casualties on the Indian side. There were other serious possibilities associated with it as according to some media reports senior Indian military commanders including the Army Commander and the Corps Commander were present at Rajauri cantonment and could well have been hit with obvious repercussions bound to lead to further escalation.
- What if the Indian pilot had died while bailing out or had been killed by local civilians after he parachuted into Pakistani controlled territory. Any of these outcomes would have resulted in raising of temperatures, inflaming the emotions and surely led to further escalation. It would also have taken away the chance for a

goodwill gesture on part of Pakistan that became a catalyst for de-escalation of the crisis.

- What if Indian stand-off weapons accidentally hit a sensitive target on Pakistani side.
- What if India had neither lost an aircraft nor a pilot into Pakistani captivity. Would it have emboldened India to greater vertical or horizontal escalation?
- What if Pakistani 'Swift Retort' had not achieved the desired results. Would it have been possible for Pakistan to de-escalate so easily?
- What if Pakistan Navy had sunk the intruding Indian submarine, rather than warning it and letting it go.
- What if India was not bluffing but made good on its threatened missile strikes against Pakistani cities or other critical targets and Pakistan lived up to its resolve to retaliate three times over. What if either side had mistaken a conventional armed missile strike as a nuclear strike and accordingly reacted in either launch on warning or launch-under-attack mode? It is hard to believe that there would have still been a chance left to apply brakes and prevent further escalation of the crisis.

Conclusion

In the light of the above narrative, one can draw some useful conclusions from the theoretical aspects of the concept of 'Inadvertent Escalation' as well as from the case study of the February 2019 crisis between India and Pakistan as under:

The February 2019 crisis has for all practical purposes turned the conception of 'Third Party Brokering'³⁹ in Indo-Pakistani crises, as a thing of the past. This is mainly due to the fact that there is no 'honest' or 'impartial' broker left to mediate in future South Asian crises. The United States has adopted a clearly partisan policy in favour of India which was

clearly discernible from the conduct of US National Security Advisor, Secretary of State and other officials. China is viewed as hostile to India and sympathetic to Pakistan in general and by the Indians in particular. The Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf states that once had close fraternal ties with Pakistan now seem to be tilting towards India and in any case their politico-diplomatic clout, though substantial, cannot be compared with America's diplomatic weight. Russia has long-standing strategic relationship with India and of late has been trying to revamp its relations with Pakistan but as of now it doesn't have the political capital to influence the outcome of an India-Pakistan crisis beyond goodwill gestures and counselling restraint. The EU traditionally follows the US lead and rarely takes independent positions/initiatives in such situations.

The February 2019 crisis has re-established the efficacy of Pakistan's conventional deterrence capability and has removed the myths that in any conventional confrontation with India Pakistan's conventional responses will not be adequate and it will be forced to lean on its nuclear capability sooner than later. Pakistan has also been able to demonstrate its political will and resolve to forcefully deal with any infringement of its security and has thus bolstered its deterrence message.⁴⁰

The crisis has also raised serious questions as to India's choices for escalation in a future crisis with Pakistan. India has now tried the ground 'surgical' strikes as well as the aerial ones and made a botched attempt to bring the maritime dimension also into play. What can be expected of India in the next crisis? Will it follow the same old playbook maybe at an increased scale and accept greater risks of escalation? The problem is that a large-scale aerial operation has greater risk of 'entanglement' thereby causing 'inadvertent escalation' and it cannot be pursued without taking defensive measures on ground which means creating greater tensions and risks of escalation. Will it use some other instruments such as the armed drones cutting the costs of failure because in case these are shot down the loss will be substantially less than an aircraft, and there is no

risk of losing the pilot in adversary's hands. However, these cannot find targets close to the LOC or international border for spectacular results and their ability to strike at deep targets in an active air defence environment is suspect at best. Yet, it is likely to be an option for future 'reprisal' strikes.

It is also obvious that, the more limited the scale of an operation the more advantageous it would be for Pakistan, which can counter the threat with comparable or even greater force, while India would be frittering away its numerical advantage by employing its forces in a piecemeal manner. It is apparent that India has almost run out of options for sub-conventional responses and employment of anything more than very limited scale of force runs the risk of inevitable escalation. This problem would be further compounded by India's compulsion for permanent force deployments in Ladakh as well as North East frontier with China, after last year's military stand-off between the two countries. It was the most serious since 1962; whereas in the past more of lip service was paid in response to the Chinese threat than deployment of any meaningful military force on the Himalayan borders.⁴¹

India's option to foment terrorism in Pakistan in response to alleged Pakistan sponsored 'cross-border terrorism,' as articulated by India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval as well as by former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar,⁴² has also been severely curtailed with the loss of operational/intelligence facilities in Afghanistan.

The often-repeated claims, by the Indians and by some in Pakistan after the so-called surgical strikes that, Pakistan's nuclear bluff has been called, were also proved to be baseless since Pakistan effectively demonstrated its conventional deterrence capability and the credibility of its nuclear deterrence was proven by India's inability to further escalate the military confrontation. The crisis has proven beyond doubt that Pakistan can deal with such minor infringements with its conventional forces and any

expectation that Pakistan would start contemplating the use of nuclear weapons or at least the Low yield short range NASR weapon systems is a fallacy. It should be very clear that the minimum provocation to evoke a serious consideration of a possible use of NASR would be 'Cold Start' type attack by Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) at several axes. Short of this Pakistan is more than capable of returning the Indian favour maybe with some bonus in the conventional realm.

The February 2019 crisis also witnessed irresponsible statements and nuclear sabre rattling by politicians on both sides of the border not unlike the past crises. However, in the past on the Pakistani side such statements came from ministers who are remotely concerned with security policy and particularly nuclear policy but the most disturbing development was that on the Indian side such inflammatory statements came from Prime Minister Modi himself who is the ultimate nuclear use authority in India, who continued to echo these threatening pronouncements even months later simply to gain some political advantage in the soon to be held parliamentary elections.

One can safely conclude that rhetoric aside India and Pakistan are sane enough to understand that unbridled military actions in a nuclearized security environment are fraught with dangers of escalation. Even if the care is taken to avoid deliberate escalation, the danger of inadvertent escalation cannot be eliminated altogether.

Endnotes

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² Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 1988, London, MacMillan Press, p210.

³ William Kaufmann, quoted in Freedman, 210.

⁴ Richard Smoke, quoted in Freedman, 211.

⁵ Thomas Schelling, quoted in Freedman, 220.

- ⁶ Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons; Principles, Problems, Prospects*, 2009, Oxford University Press, p 62.
- ⁷ Quinlan, 62-3.
- ⁸ Quinlan, 63.
- ⁹ Quinlan, 66.
- ¹⁰ Quinlan, 67.
- ¹¹ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation – Metaphors and Scenarios*, 1965, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, p 39.
- ¹² Kahn, quoted in Freedman, 210.
- ¹³ Kahn, *On Escalation*, 3.
- ¹⁴ Kahn, 4.
- ¹⁵ Kahn, 5. Also see Herman Kahn, *The Concept of Escalation*, in John Garnett (ed.) *Theories of Peace and Security*, 1970, Palgrave MacMillan, p 249.
- ¹⁶ Kahn, *On Escalation*, 7,8,10.
- ¹⁷ Kahn, 11.
- ¹⁸ Kahn, 13.
- ¹⁹ Rajesh Rajagopalan, *The Threat of Unintended Use of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia*, in E. Sridharan (ed.), *The India-Pakistan Nuclear Relationship*, 2007, London, Routledge, p 277.
- ²⁰ Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, 1,2.
- ²¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 1993, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p 161.
- ²² James M. Acton, ed., ‘ENTANGLEMENT – Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks,’ 2017, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 1.
- ²³ Acton, p. 2.
- ²⁴ Ali Ahmed, *India, Pakistan, and the Tussle of Escalation Dominance*, South Asian Voices, Washington, DC, Henry L. Stimson Center, October 7, 2018.
- ²⁵ Walter C. Ladwig, *A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine*, *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08), p 158–190.
- ²⁶ For a very balanced and concise analysis see Shaukat Qadir, *An Analysis of the Kargil Conflict*, *RUSI Journal* April 2002, p 24-30.
- ²⁷ For instance, in Chittisinghpura, a village in Anantnag District of Jammu and Kashmir, 35 Sikh villagers were massacred purportedly by Pakistan based groups on 20 March 2000 on the eve of President Clinton’s visit to India to malign Pakistan and to depict the Kashmiris struggle for their right of self-determination as cross-border terrorism. Investigations into the incident later revealed that it was a stage-managed operation by Indian security forces.
- ²⁸ Toby Dalton and Gaurav Kalwani, ‘War on the Rocks, November 1, 2019.
- ²⁹ Happymon Jacob, ‘Line of Fire,’ 2019, Oxford University Press, p. 1-2.

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- ³⁰ Amy Kazmin, 'Narendra Modi Vows Retribution After Deadly Kashmir Attack,' *Financial Times*, February 15, 2019; quoted in Hagerty, p. viii.
- ³¹ Keynote address by Lieutenant General (Retired) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, Advisor NCA and former Director General, Strategic Plans Division at 7th IISS-CISS Workshop on 'South Asian Strategic Stability', at London, 6 February 2020, wherein he articulated the Pakistani policy of 'Quid-pro-quo-plus.'
- ³² Mansoor Ahmed and Maimuna Ashraf, 'The Pulwama-Balakot Crisis: A Strategic Assessment,' *CISS Insight*, Summer 2019, Vol VII, No. 1, p. 2.
- ³³ Mansoor, p. 4.
- ³⁴ Sanjeev Miglani and Drazen Jorgic, 'India, Pakistan Threatened to Unleash Missiles at Each Other: Sources,' Reuters, March 17, 2019. The account says 'there was no suggestion that the missiles involved were anything more than conventional weapons.' A subsequent story reports that the Indian intelligence chief, Anil Dhasmana, told Munir [Lt Gen Asim Munir, DG ISI] that India would escalate the conflict if the Indian MIG pilot was harmed. Also see, Shishir Gupta, Rezaul H. Laskar and Yashwant Raj, 'India, Pakistan Came Close to Firing Missiles at Each Other on February 27,' *Hindustan Times*, March 23, 2019; quoted in Hagerty, p. viii.
- ³⁵ Toby Dalton, 'Signalling and Catalysis in Future Nuclear Crises in South Asia: Two Questions after the Balakot Episode,' *Nuclear Crisis Group*, June 25, 2019.
- ³⁶ 'Readout of Telephonic Conversation between National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and US NSA Amb. John Bolton,' Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, February 16, 2019 (<https://www.mea.gov.in/press-release.htm?dtd/31058/Readout-of-Telephonic-Conversation-between-National-Security-Advisor-Ajit-Doval-and-US-NSA-Amb-John-Bolton>), quoted in Devin T. Hagerty, 'Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia, 2020, Palgrave Macmillan, p. viii.
- ³⁷ Toby Dalton, 'Signaling and Catalysis in Future Nuclear Crises in South Asia: Two Questions after the Balakot Episode,' *Nuclear Crisis Group*, June 25, 2019.
- ³⁸ 'Terrorists Will Pay for Pulwama Attack, Says PM; Delivers Warning to Pakistan,' *Hindustan Times*, February 15, 2019; "Pulwama Attack: Pakistan Warns India Against Military Action," *BBC*, February 19, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47290107>, quoted in Hagerty, p. vii.
- ³⁹ The concept of 'Third Party Brokering was developed by Moeed Yusuf through an analysis of India-Pakistan Crises but apparently it has fallen by the wayside after the Pulwama-Balakot-Rajauri Crisis of February 2019. See, Moeed Yusuf, 'Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: US Crisis Management in South Asia,' 2018, Stanford University Press.
- ⁴⁰ Mansoor, p. 5-6.
- ⁴¹ For an analysis of the strategic costs to India of the Ladakh Crisis see, Arzan Tarapore, 'India-China Strategic Competition and the Costs of the Ladakh Crisis,' *South Asian Voices*, May 21, 2021.
- ⁴² Former Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar suggested in 2018 that, 'India should remove a thorn with a thorn', widely interpreted as a threat to sponsor terrorism in Pakistan..., quoted in Dalton, Signalling and Catalysis.