War Termination under Nuclear Overhang:
A Case Study of India – Pakistan Conflicts

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Introduction

Why do wars last as long as they do? What can an initiator expect when it starts a war? Theories of endogenous war termination show that duration and outcome is closely related to the willingness to make concessions on war aims, and that this willingness is itself determined by warfare. Leaders can, and often do, modify their demands as they update their beliefs about the strength of the adversary, its resolve, and the costs of compelling it to make concessions. They revise war aims as the expectations about the military outcome rise and fall with battlefield developments[1]. However, in the standard empirical specification of the problem; it is assumed that war aims are exogenous to fighting.

How are wars brought to an end? Historians, military strategists and foreign affairs experts tend to neglect this question and often the discussion surrounds the questions of how war begins. Bennett and Stam (1996) provide the first rigorous empirical investigation of the determinants of war duration by taking into account both political and military variables[2]. They find that imbalances in military forces lead to shorter wars as do permissive terrain. This framework will be used in this article to analyze the potential conflict between India and Pakistan under a nuclear overhang andhow an armed conflict might unfold between the two nuclear-armed neighbors and how it will affect war termination discourse.

Theory of war termination

Leaders form expectations about what they can gain from war and weigh these benefits against the costs of obtaining them through fighting. Only leaders who are optimistic about their chances in a war will tend to initiate it. This is a well-known claim that encompasses optimism about the outcome (victory), duration (short), and costs (low) of war[3]. However, because at least two states are required to start a war, at least one of them (the loser) must have been wrong in its estimates. Within

the rationalist framework, both sides may be optimistic at the same time if they possess private information about their ability to wage war.

These divergent beliefs cannot be reconciled without some risk of war if there are incentives to conceal this information. A genuine risk of war always exists in crisis bargaining models that assume war is a costly lottery over outcomes. But bargaining does not end with the outbreak of war. Kecskemeti (1958), Schelling (1966), and Pillar (1983) provide early informal takes on war as a bargaining process[4]. Building on the ideas of Clausewitz and Fuller, they argue that war is a costly way to fulfill the expectations of the opponent. As learning continues it is partially endogenized because the theoretical model is solved with complete information, and the equilibrium involves no bargaining at all—the first offer is immediately accepted. During the war, the question arises whether the costly lottery assumption is misleading, especially for information based explanations[5]. It turns out that the answer depends on what assumptions are made about the process of fighting itself. Collin Powell argues that the insights of the costly lottery model extend to intrawar bargaining if we assume one-sided asymmetric information, a protocol that allows only the uninformed player to make offers and a static distribution of power[6]. Of course, the probability of military victory does not remain constant throughout the war. Recent models allow for a changing distribution of power by incorporating either resource constraints (Filson and Werner 2002) or military objectives (Smith and Stam 2003), with probability of ultimate victory in both cases depending on success in individual battles[7]. From these models, which also assume one-sided bargaining, it is possible to derive the principle of convergence. The principle posits that wars end when expectations about military victory converge sufficiently.

It specifies the mechanism through which this convergence occurs and shows that mutual optimism is not a necessary condition to fight a war, which may explain the many cases of losing initiators. Can the principle be recovered under the alternating-offers protocol and a changing distribution of power? The answer is yes, at least for the case of finite number of types. According to the theory of endogenous war termination, states possess private information about their ability to wage war, and this information is gradually revealed through fighting. Every battlefield outcome, every rejected offer, and every unreasonable demand cause a state to update its beliefs about the strength of its adversary by inferring what types of opponents are likely to behave this way. The situation is enormously

complicated by the fact that states are well aware of this process and therefore seek to manipulate these beliefs strategically.

At any point in time players balance their demands (war aims) between the gains to be had from settling on some terms and the risk of continued fighting. The terms are jointly determined by the current military position which reflects how well the state has done in the war thus far, and its evaluation of the future which reflects its beliefs about the strength of its opponent. These beliefs are continuously updated throughout the war based both on diplomatic behavior of the opponent and the outcomes on the battlefield. Thus, when players formulate proposals for peace, they engage in the well-known risk-return trade-off. That is, they balance the probability of having the offer rejected at a cost of more fighting against the gains of demanding slightly more.

The current offer made by a player then is a function of its beliefs about how strong its adversary is and the current military situation. The offer is designed in such a way that weaker opponents would accept it (thus yielding a larger benefit) while stronger ones would reject it (thus risking more fighting). With time, the facts that its opponent has rejected previous offers and has yet to collapse militarily may to cause the state to become more pessimistic about its chances of success. The offers begin favoring the opponent because now the state knows that it has to satisfy a stronger adversary. Further, this new evidence acquired the hard way gradually displaces the assumptions the state had before the war.

Political Context and Notion of Victory in India – Pakistan Context

Any armed crisis or war in South Asia is likely to progress to the point where one side possesses an advantage. At this time, the conflict is likely to intensify as the winning side may choose to press its advantage, while the losing side will want to reverse its losses. This represents a crucial moment, and a moment in which escalatory tendencies could lead to the deployment and/or use of nuclear weapons.

Generally speaking several strategic doctrines refer to war termination as the conclusion of operations on terms favorable to a country. Defense strategists are advised to keep the question of how a conflict might end and how the military campaign should be designed to achieve a certain end state. Once a course of action is decided upon the doctrines recognize that the plans may well be interrupted by

unforeseen events that may force a reassessment of the terms on which hostilities will be concluded and also the notion of victory itself.

The Kargil conflict of 1999, 2001-2002 India Pakistan military standoffs and 2008 Mumbai crisis offer insights into varying notion of victory for India and Pakistan under their respective political context at the time of crisis.

Pakistan's main political objective during the limited Kargil war was to internationalize the Kashmir issue and obtain support of the international community for the Pakistani claim over Kashmir. However, Pakistan could not secure the required international support; instead, its cross-LoC intrusions were severely condemned by the international community as an unprovoked, unjustified act of aggression, which had the dangerous potential of spinning out of control. Ultimately, lack of support from China and the American pressure, coupled with the military situation turning in India's favor, forced Pakistan to withdraw from Kargil heights. Despite the initial setbacks, Pakistani withdrawal and lack of international support was seen by India as victory and achievements of its political aims vis a vis the Kargil conflict. Kargil war also highlights the fact that it is possible, in a limited war, to pursue the absolutist notions of victory of eviction of enemy forces from an occupied area without broadening of conflict. However, this principle cannot be generalized in the potential limited conflict in future.

The 2001-2002 year-long crisis was precipitated by a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 with the possible intention of holding captive or killing Parliamentarians present in the premises. This serious incident and the response of the Indian Government in deploying its troops along the Indo-Pak border closely paralleled the Bush Administration's actions after 9/11. An estimated 800,000 troops, including two strike corps, were deployed on India's western borders, its Air Force units and satellite airfields were activated, and the Eastern (Bay of Bengal) fleet moved into the northern Arabian Sea to join the Western fleet for blockading Pakistani ports, if required. Predictably, Pakistan undertook large-scale counter-deployments of its troops leading to an eye ball-to-eyeball confrontation along the border, which carried the danger of conflict being ignited, not by design, but by misperception, accident, or miscalculation.

Indian political objective was to use coercive diplomacy to dissuade Pakistan from continuing its support to perceived cross-border terrorism, and persuading the

United States to restrain Pakistan from pursuing its objectives in Kashmir. Pakistani objective was to prevent the break out of war and retain its national narrative on Kashmir. The nuclear factor and United States diplomatic efforts were again a limiting factor for India to pursue its political objectives via military means.

In late November 2008, a terrorist incident of extraordinary scale and duration occurred in Mumbai, India's largest city and commercial hub. Over three days at multiple Mumbai tourist and cultural landmarks, 172 people were killed. India blamed that the attackers were members of Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) who had come from Pakistan to conduct the attack.

Theories of Victory

There appears to be a mismatch between what India and Pakistan think is possible by way of victory —indeed, their views seem mutually exclusive

India
The Indian writings by several academics converge on offering three operational conditions that, if achieved, would be viewed as a victory leading to the larger goal of forestalling terrorist threats to India: Capturing Pakistani territory, inflicting losses of a permanent nature on the Pakistan military, and destroying terrorist camps and important terrorists operating in or from Pakistan. The first two conditions clearly flirt with Pakistan's nuclear redlines, while the third would likely involve military action that would be considered escalatory by Pakistan.

Pakistan
According to the Pakistani experts, Pakistan would likely view any outcome that frustrates India's successful implementation of Cold Start as a victory. Such an outcome would likely be in tolerable to India, which would be unwilling to risk Pakistan feeling emboldened to continue its behavior[8].

The central challenge faced also is the ambiguity regarding India's political objectives. Brodie's words, written in the 1950s, ring just as true in the 21st century: "The one basic Proposition which must be established… is this: limited war must also mean limited objectives.[9]" This is a major point of disagreement between India and Pakistan. While India sees its objectives as limited, Pakistan views them as excessive.

Absent a better idea of how these military objectives are intended to achieve India's political goals, it is difficult to assess how limited they are and what degree of force might be necessary—assuming military force could in fact contribute to the achievement of India's larger objectives. The lack of clarity regarding desired political outcomes also complicates the question of War termination: how will India know when it has accomplished what it set out to do? In other words, how much punishment is enough[10]?

Even if India's political goals can be delineated, the limitation of objectives does not guarantee a limited war. Many a war has been fought amid confusion over the belligerents' aims and goals. Further, modern war fighting puts a premium on surprise and swiftness, which minimizes the time available for diplomacy or negotiation over a list of demands.

Factors for War Termination

Role of external powers

Historical experiences of crisis and conflict between India and Pakistan have shaped their respective approaches to conflict de-escalation. There has been comparatively minimal focus on mechanisms for war termination in the 21st century; rather, the conversation centered on historical examples of conflict and crisis management. There is a broad agreement that the best opportunity for bilateral diplomacy to prevent crisis escalation is before a war erupts, after which diplomatic measures risk being overwhelmed by military actions. During a conflict, back-channel and crisis diplomacy will be ongoing as in past crises, but the rapidity with which a South Asian crisis might escalate could overwhelm the ability of diplomats and political leaders to reach agreements that would lead to a ceasefire. This harkens back to the need for more and stronger avenues of communication. For India, the proximate cause of conflict will affect India's response as well as the conditions and demands it would set before accepting a ceasefire or war termination. From an Indian perspective, if Pakistani military gains had been made, as in Kargil, they would need to be reversed before India would be likely to accept a ceasefire in place[11].

India-Pakistan relations are too sour for a bilateral approach to conflict de-escalation to have much chance of success; India is only open to third party "facilitation" and provision of "good offices" to resolve bilateral conflict. Direct mediation or intervention is ruled out by India as per provisions of the 1972 Simla agreement. Pakistan, however, views the involvement of third parties as essential. India and Pakistan also disagree on which third parties they would consider acceptable or welcome as interlocutors. The Indians argued that the United States remains the only potentially honest broker for the region, while a Pakistani participant stated that Pakistan would be reluctant to seek US intervention. He cited the fact that United States has been tolerant of India becoming a nuclear power but has punished Pakistan for the same, and in recent years the US pivot to Asia where US aims to build up India against China[12].

Despite India's objection to China's involvement, China has abiding interests in the stability of South Asia by virtue of its 1963 border agreement with Pakistan. While the Soviet assisted in the negotiation of the 1966 Tashkent agreement, modern Russia was not seen as a potential facilitator, as it is mired in its own challenges at home and abroad. Of the multilateral institutions only the United Nations (UN) is seen as a legitimate authority, though there are reservations about its "uneven record" of dealing with crises and its potentially limited leverage. Regional security organizations such as SAARC and SCO can be ruled out because their mandates forbid involvement in bilateral relations and war scenarios.

Nuclear Use

It would be very difficult to reach war termination in a way that preserves any political gains. Assuming initial nuclear employment by Pakistan of low yield tactical nuclear weapon on a military target in its own territory or Indian territory, India would face the problem of whether and how to retaliate, given its doctrine of massive retaliation, while Pakistan would suffer both the immediate, on-the-ground consequences of nuclear use as well as an international community determined to maintain the nuclear taboo. Indeed, after nuclear use, Pakistan is likely to be in a double bind: it will need a face-saving way to terminate the war, but it is unlikely that international actors concerned with the future of nuclear proliferation will seek a conclusion that can be read as a victory for Pakistan. It is unlikely though that Pakistan will use nuclear weapons in a first use mode if its military operations have resulted in important gains inside Indian territory. It is

also quite possible that India continues its conventional military operations despite first nuclear use by Pakistan.

Conclusion

Transitioning from limited or major combat operations to a ceasefire and eventual war termination will be complex in the India Pakistan war scenario although not impossible.

Despite the continuity of policies pursued by the Bush and Obama administrations regarding the Mumbai crisis 2008, the policy mechanisms they relied on have differed. The changes made by the Obama White House reflect different preferences on how to organize foreign policy, not lessons learned about crisis management. Bush relied on existing government structures and policy flow charts. Obama preferred to rely on special envoys who are outside the system and who report directly to the Secretary of State and the White House—for example, on AfPak issues, the Special Representation for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP).

Changing views in Washington regarding the genesis of and solutions for India-Pakistan tensions also could reshape US crisis management.

De-escalation, is uncharted territory. Escalation can be unilateral, but de-escalation must necessarily be bilateral and possibly multilateral. In South Asia, distrust is rampant and domestic politics combine with emotional media coverage to produce an environment against any effort to reduce tensions. During a crisis or conflict, governments of India and Pakistan must exercise message discipline to avoid sending unintended signals, third parties must carefully calibrate their involvement, and a way must be found for both sides to exit gracefully without losing face.

The particular characteristics of the event that sparks hostilities will be critical in determining wartime objectives and goals, and will thus directly affect the de-escalation problem.

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Endnotes

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