

Book Review

Tackling Deterrence Uncertainty in South Asia

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Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia
By Devin T. Hagerty
Palgrave Pivot, Switzerland, 2019

Authors writing on South Asian nuclear security usually subscribe to either the *proliferation optimist* narrative or to the various components of the *proliferation pessimist* school. The author of the text under review has been, historically, a votary of the former narrative along with such luminaries as, Kenneth N. Waltz and Sumit Ganguly. However, with the publication of the present text, Devin T. Hagerty seems to have distanced himself from the optimism — vis-à-vis stable nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan— he once endorsed during the halcyon days of 1998. This is not to say that the present text runs along the lines now firmly established by Scott D. Sagan and S. Paul Kapur. But, where it differs from the optimists is in his belief that the current arguments, visions and revisions are seemingly more in tune with the contemporary political realities of the India-Pak dyad, where an intermittent bomb blast or string of gunshots in Kashmir, Mumbai or New Delhi are reminiscent of General Zia’s dystopian machination of ‘bleeding India by a thousand cuts’. The implications of this sub-conventional tactic, employed so adroitly by Pakistan, are not only resoundingly felt, denounced and ultimately borne by India, they also betray the superficiality of nuclear deterrence in South Asia.

The present text is an informed, yet pithy commentary on the history of India-Pakistan crises since 1998-99, the role of and impact upon nuclear deterrence in these crises and the ways in which deterrence stability can be enhanced in this conflict dyad. Although the latter portion is especially short — often reminiscent of Timothy Crawford’s *pivotal deterrence* and Rajesh Basrur’s *trilateral compellance*—it cannot be ruled out as a set of possible policy options for all the three interested parties — read India, Pakistan and the

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United States— in the South Asian deterrence game. This is especially true in the light of the gruesome Pulwama terrorist attack of February 2019, which rendered undoubtable the South Asian axiom of regional peace being at the mercy of proxy warriors. Hagerty begins his book by narrating the despicable suicide mission in Pulwama and the ensuing breach of peace in the subcontinent which again fell short of war. Here, as always, the time-honoured logic of nuclear deterrence is evoked to make sense of de-escalation. Hagerty's work is laden with a tremendous virtue: it is a work not only for experts but for anyone who might take a lively interest in South Asian security. It is crisp, informative, historically grounded and repetitive—the latter an absolute necessity for making the basic arguments of any academic writing credible, if not understandable.

Terrorism and Deterrence

Hagerty admits that the latest terrorist attacks on India has indeed modified his analysis of South Asian deterrence stability, warranting massive last-minute revisions of the entire corpus of this work (p. x). This reader-friendly account aims at simplifying the approach to deterrence stability by providing an abstract for each chapter in their respective beginnings and a compendium of main arguments in a chapter plan at the end of the introduction (p. 5-8). There are five chapters in total, each dealing with a particular facet of nuclear weapons and deterrence stability in South Asia: the introductory chapter sets the political context for the India-Pakistan nuclear arms competition till 2019; the second deals with the history of dyadic crises till 2016; the third, aims at a motley yet ingenious explanation of India's strategic restraint in the face of repeated and unprovoked terrorist attacks ostensibly aided by Pakistan; the fourth, and perhaps the most important chapter, deals with the empirical aspects of South Asia's dyadic deterrence relationship and the theoretical elements of deterrence stability for a novel interpretation of the latter; and the fifth, as adumbrated earlier, comprises the trends and policy choices which might be of service to the three interested countries if they wish to avoid nuclear Armageddon as an unfortunate fallout of proxy warfare in the region.

The author attempts to establish a combination of three factors for explaining Indian forbearance in the aftermath of major terrorist attacks— nuclear deterrence, US crisis management, and a lack of favourable conventional military options. Rubbishing other scholarly claims vis-à-vis India's purported doctrine of *strategic restraint*, Hagerty enunciates the over-determination of the second and third factors by the first, i.e., nuclear deterrence (p. 45-51). But, in doing so, he unconsciously ends up supporting some vestiges of his erstwhile proliferation optimism, not least providing fillip to an inferior conceptual framework— the stability-instability paradox or SISF, which has been time and again

derided by South Asian deterrence scholars as a hollow and partisan conceptual strait-jacket. If nuclear deterrence is for preventing all types of escalatory crises it certainly does not work expectedly in this dyad. And if it still is the overriding factor behind India's cautious response of not moving beyond self-proclaimed surgical strikes— as claimed by the author—how could any logical research factor in the role of doctrinal dissimilarities, status quo and revisionist tendencies and offence-defence variables for a more holistic analysis of the Pakistani pincer movement which has caught India along the escalation ladder? It is not the *dearth* of a good conventional response for India (p. 44) but the utter compulsion of stopping short of the conventional level which can explain Indian forbearance. But, the narrative in question moves forward sans directly confronting these ideas.

Question of Doctrines

However, the question of doctrines receives a plausible yet perfunctory treatment towards the end of this work, where it is evoked to substantiate Hagerty's novel interpretation of deterrence stability. He begins by positing deterrence stability as the successor to the now stale optimism-pessimism debate. In an almost Weberian manner, Hagerty then posits deterrence stability as a continuum between two ideal types— *pure deterrence stability* and *pure deterrence instability*—having material-technological, doctrinal, organizational and political factors influencing how far the continuum would tilt either way (p. 70-73). By inference, deterrence stability becomes a relative concept capable of increasing and decreasing over time and circumstances. This interpretation is realistic, facilitating the inclusion of weapons capabilities, doctrines, and command and control mechanisms. Theoretically, Hagerty takes recourse to an admixture of McGeorge Bundy's concept of *existential deterrence* and Vipin Narang's distinction between India's *assured retaliation* and Pakistan's *asymmetric escalation* at the nuclear doctrinal level, as the conceptual bases of regional nuclear deterrence in South Asia (p. 86).

By fathoming the extent of doctrinal dissimilarities between India and Pakistan—where the latter's first-use pledge could generate what has been called full spectrum deterrence—Hagerty enunciates his idea of *ugly deterrence stability* in South Asia. This type of stability along the continuum, "stems from the existence and resolve of sub-conventional actors *and* the ambiguity surrounding the precise authorship of their attacks, which renders clear state-to-state communication and signaling extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible" (p. 79). Here, this idea is premised upon George Perkovich's twin requirements of deterrence stability—control over nuclear arsenals and prevention of conflicts with escalatory potentials. The lacuna of this work lies in the fact that despite hinting at what is seemingly the root cause of deterrence instability in South Asia— doctrinal dissimilarities

which leaves no space for India to explore in between the sub-conventional and nuclear rungs of escalation —it veers into abstraction and modelling to establish the nature of *ugly stability* in this dyad. There is no reference to India's possible reconsideration of its no-first-use policy, despite its publication in as late as July, 2019. Whether for oversight or conviction, the latter impacts upon Hagerty's policy recommendations whereby he lauds India's NFU policy for its alleged role in de-escalation. Opining that India should abjure its futile search for a viable conventional option against Pakistan under the nuclear threshold (p. 111), Hagerty proffers certain recommendations which are indeed not as realistic as his formulation of *ugly stability*.

In a nutshell, Hagerty's recommendations for enhancing deterrence stability in South Asia ranges from imploring Pakistan to cease its support for proxies and to abjure its tactical nuclear capability, to elucidating the virtues of India's NFU policy toward developing the threat of *calibrated* retaliation to Pakistan's first-use stance. There are clichéd arguments imploring both parties to peacefully resolve the Kashmir dispute and an adumbration of the pivotal role of the US in ensuring deterrence stability in the region. Any erudite follower of South Asian nuclear issues would term these recommendations banal and impossible, not least when India is already hinting at modifying its declared policy of no-first-use. And such a doctrinal parity could counterbalance the disadvantages of geography and the absence of Confidence Building Measures and Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures in the region. With the Kashmir issue now seemingly under the firm grasp of the Indian government, Pakistan's nuclear bluff can be deftly handled by enhancing the credibility of India's deterrent forces and bridging the loopholes within the escalation ladder— if India is already not in a position to move freely within the sub-nuclear levels. After all, even a state like Pakistan — which ill-fits the unitary actor model — would not dare nuclear Armageddon and the role of proxies would cease only when the county is ripped off the chances of asymmetric escalation.